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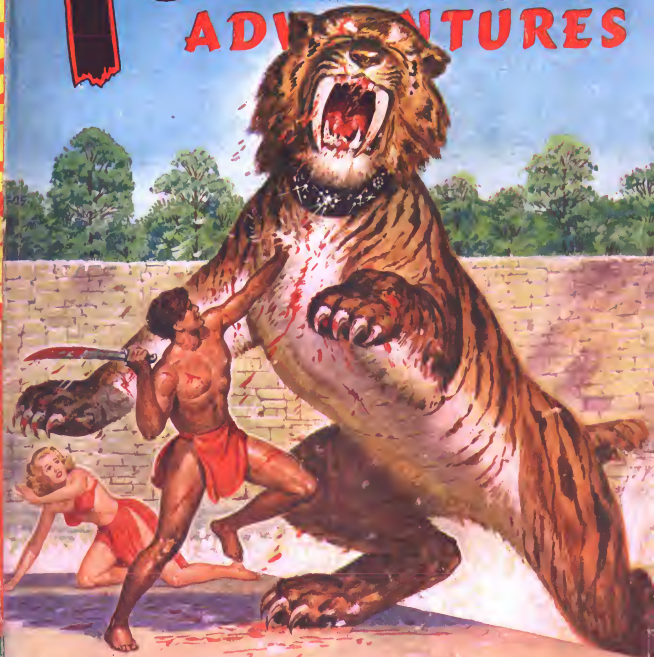
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ADV ADVENTURES

VOLUME 9
NUMBER 8

FANTASTIC
ADVENTURES

DECEMBER
1947



TOKA FIGHTS THE BIG CATS
by J. W. PELKIE

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Front cover painting by Robert Gibson Jones, illustrating a scene from "Toke Fights the Big Cats."

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Published monthly by ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY at 185 North Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill. New York Office, Empire State Building, New York 1, N. Y. Washington Office, International Building, 1318 F Street, N.W., Washington 4, D. C. Entered as second-class matter, July 9th, 1947, at the Post Office, Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. In U. S., Canada, Mexico, South and Central America and U. S. Possessions, \$2.50 for twelve issues; in British Empire, \$3.50; all other foreign countries, \$4.50 for twelve issues. Subscribers should allow at least two weeks for change of address. All communications about subscriptions should be addressed to the Director of Circulation, Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 185 North Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.



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The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

YOU'VE already taken a good look at this month's cover, so you know that Bob Jones has come through with another swell painting. And to top it off, the cover was painted around the new "Toka" novel you've been requesting for the past year. J. W. Pelkie finally came through with another yarn about his famous character, and from this point on it would be a waste of time to talk about the story since you'll want to start reading it right away. So we'll just leave it at that, saying, enjoy yourself!

THIS issue was really a humdinger to get to press. First of all we've had to try and sandwich in vacations along with deadlines. And they just don't mix. And to top things off, the dero have been at work again. Just when we were ready to go to press we found that a number of cuts had been lost, and crowning blow of all, on Mammoth Western, we found that the wrong cover had been plated—and the magazine was on the presses. Well you can imagine what your editors have been doing for the past few days. Running around wouldn't be telling it right—we've been flying! (a la saucer.) So now, sitting down to the finishing touches on this issue of FA we're keeping our fingers crossed.

JOHAN and Dorothy de Courcy are back again with a short entitled, "The Devil To Pay." It seems that Satan had some trouble with an upstart of a mortal—you know, one of them durned humans—and he had to make him pay the piper, in this case, the devil himself. A neat little yarn.

WE'RE glad to welcome Dwight V. Swain back to our pages with a swell story entitled, "The Hands Of Ali Jinnah." Dwight is now living in the Ozark mountains down in Arkansas, and it's been too long between stories, we'd say. When you read this, Dwight, make a note of it. Quit feudin' with the revenooers and start writing!

IF YOU'LL glance across at page 7 you'll see a photo of Berkeley Livingstone in all his pristine glory. (Well, in all his glory, anyway.) The reason being you readers have been deluging us with requests for more photos of your favorite authors. So along with Berk's new story in this issue we're giving you his newest photo. (The photographer promptly went out and shot himself, we understand—with a camera, of course.)

But to get back to Berk's yarn, "The Gift." It's all about a man who read the Arabian Nights, (unexpurgated edition) and decided that it was not just a collection of fictitious legends. He firmly believed that he was an integral part of Scheherazade's tales. As usual, this is as far as we can go here. If we said anything more we'd be giving away the story. So you find out what happened.

WE'VE been after Elroy Arno for a long time to do a long story for FA. We finally talked him into it, and the result is on page 122, a short novel called "Perfume For A Princess." If you remember, Arno did a very good job on a story called "Secret Of The Yomar" not so very long ago. And we think he's done an even better one on this new story. You'll read about a man who stows away on a space ship, hunting for a beautiful Princess. He doesn't know her, or very much about her—except that she wears a certain perfume. And the perfume was more important than the hero realized. . . .

FINISHING up the issue is a nice little short by dependable Geoff St. Reynard, entitled, "The Warder And The Wampum." This is a story about a man who worshipped one thing above all else in the world—money. So when he went on a trip out west and met an Indian ghost, it was only natural that they should get around to talking about wampum. But the Indian's idea of what wampum was, was somewhat different than what we call money. You'll like this one.

OUT in California there's a man named Howard Browne, former Managing Editor of FA and the rest of our pulp magazines. Howard decided a short time back that he wanted to do nothing but sit in the patio of a California home, enjoy the weather (it rains there too we understand), and just generally relax. Well, Howard, who is one of our best friends and a heck of a nice guy to boot, is doing just that. And he's doing something else too. We just got a letter from him saying that he is working on a sequel to his classic "Warrior Of The Dawn," featuring Tharn, the cave man. He told us we could expect the novel shortly. And when we get it, "The Return Of Tharn" will be a cover story and a treat for all you readers. So hurry up, Howard, don't keep us waiting! . . . All of which just about winds up this issue. But we'll be seeing you again next month. —W.L.H.

PRESENTING THE AUTHOR



BERKELEY LIVINGSTON

IT IS an amazing thing how few are the deeds of a man. I discovered that the moment I sat down to hammer this out.

"I want your autobiography," Bill Hamling, Associate Editor of *FANTASTIC ADVENTURES*, said.

"Of course," I said dutifully. What the heck else could I say?

Well, to do it as they do in the ladies' books;

On the shady side of my thirties, being born in 1908, I am rather tall, fairly nice looking, so my wife says, and of amiable disposition. This should come as surprise to those of you who think their fantasy writers should be on the dynamic side, what with writing of the forceful things in life. But I do the introspective story rather than the action type. . . . Shall I go on about the farm in Connecticut and my dogs and pipes, etc? Better not. This isn't for that kind of mag.

I'll go back to the first sentence. Birth and place was 1908 in Chicago. Had the necessary schooling and went out into the world to carve a niche on its cold face. There was but a single factor I didn't take into consideration. I had the wrong tools. Nowadays, they give I. Q. determination tests which show the proper functional aptitudes of a man. They didn't when I was starting out. Went from job to job, none of which lasted longer than a few weeks or months. Somehow I was always quarreling with the powers that be. I guess I was a rebel, even in those days. Got interested in the stage and did some amateur theatricals with Henry Sharpe, who now does illustrations for national magazines. But though I liked that pretty well, I didn't think I had reached

my goal or was doing the things I *really* wanted to do.

Some friends rigged up a cruise, so I joined up. Without going into too great a length about it, we made the Society group, Fiji, Hawaii, in six months of just tramping the South Seas. Came back to Chicago with a world of material for stories and a vast yen to do them. But I still hadn't enough. The same friend who organized the cruise, had a copper mine in Arizona. So off went Sharpe and myself to dig copper. I had my first taste of the West, then.

I started to write after our return to Chicago. *Westerns*, *Adventures*, *Science-Fiction*, everything that had to do with the yearnings of man to get out and do things. But I couldn't do those things on the same pattern-formula as other writers. It wasn't that I was trying to be different. It was just that I was seeing things in a different light.

The West to me was a challenge. But it was a modern challenge. How would men react to it coming into its raw maw for the first time and from environments altogether different. That was the challenge. I thought there was humor there and a kind of glamor which didn't have to do with guns and horses. I thought that the West in its mountains and plains and sunlit stretches, and in its terrifying deserts, could bring out all that's real in a man. But to me, the man had to be from the East.

I don't know whether I'm right or not. But at least Ray Palmer, ye old ed. in chief thinks so. And that's half the battle. The other half is what the reader thinks. . . .

TOKA FIGHTS THE BIG CATS

by J. W. PELKIE



Queen Vola watched triumphantly as the big cat came slowly toward the throne, its huge jaws holding the limp figure, while its eyes showed a deep hunger . . .

**The Big Cats of Queen Vola were
eager for the blood of any stranger
entering the land of Zolanda**



CHAPTER I

IT WAS the hour between the retreat of a hot day's sun and the triumph of a cool night. Bordering broad flagstone walks, and thriving in geometric designs on wide lawns, were blooms of wild and subdued hue. Closing to rest after the departed sun, or opening to welcome the nearing night, they were scenting the soft twilight with the sweetly mixed bouquet of a lush Nature. In harmony with the rolling lawns, and partitioning them with interesting irregularity were neat copses of blossoming trees, their leafy and flowery arms interlocking to form cozy nooks and lacy corridors.

Enjoying all this floral setting were women of a tall and regal beauty. Their sleek, bosomy and lucently creamy femininity was complemented by the scantest of iridescent black bandeaux and briefs beneath silvery gowns of gossamer sheerness. Their hair was an exotic palomino, was braided about their proud heads and worn as if a royal crown. Their sophisticated features, their deeply gray eyes below slender lilted brows, bespoke an indefinable vacancy, a gnawing longing. Again and yet again their shadowy eyes worried to the lower east corner of the royal gardens.

There, in figure, feature, and rank a strolling one surpassed them all. Her costume was a gossamer gown of lustrous royal-blue over minimum bits of brilliantly jeweled silky black mesh. Her crown of braided tresses, shimmering their creamy palomino beauty, were enhanced by clips of flashing gems. She bore her tall and supple self with an imperial certainty. For she was Queen Vola, High Priestess of the Royal Temple of Zolanda.

The scintillating Vola seemed unaware of the silvery gowned, the much

less jeweled, the almost as regally beautiful Lora, who kept a half pace to her right rear, and who watched her with a mingling of dutiful anxiety and well concealed envy. But Vola well knew that should she fail, Lora would succeed her.

Vola seemed equally unaware of the pair of Big Cats that were pacing supplely along three paces to her right and left rear. Thickly coated with sheening long fur of tawny-orange that was brokenly tinged through with black, the beasts were nearly as high as Vola was tall. A pair of ravenously glistening yellow-white foreteeth, long as a man's forearm, curved down from the upper jaws of their black-lipped mouths. Black mesh collars, studded with fiery stones, were worn about their heavy throats. From their massive black-splotted tawny-orange heads, baleful yellow eyes blazed green fires of guardianship on Vola. And as the beasts padded leisurely and silently along, their dynamic muscle power rippled ever-ready to execute the slightest command of their royal mistress.

Pausing, absently plucking an exquisite bloom and twirling it restlessly in her strong but beautifully slender fingers, Vola wandered her fathomless gray eyes past her patiently standing Lora, past her watchfully resting Big Cats, over her sumptuous gardens and strolling priestesses and up to her shining temple that towered blue and white and massive.

FROM a great cubiform base the clean-lined structure rose in smaller cubics until it became a slender white spire straining for the Heavens. The visible sides of each cubic between spire and great base was evenly checkered with small windows. Bordered with blue stonework, the small openings were near closed with heavy vertical

bars of the same lustrous material. So far as could be seen, the base itself was spaced around with tall and wide windows that were framed in blue and vertically grilled with heavy bars. In addition, on the front, a pair of massive blue doors, their ornate panels flashing with set jewels, yawned onto a broad white terrace that ran the full length of the base front. And onto and off the terrace and in and out of the open doorway additional priestesses idled and enjoyed the day's end.

Aware of the wondering glances tendered her way, Vola strolled her gray glance down the full-length steps that flighted from the terrace to connect with a broad white highway. On down through the gardens, on down past a massive blue and white colosseum, straight through the center of a well laid city.

The wide white streets and broad blue sidewalks and thousands of low cubiform dwellings were littered and despoiled with the debris of decay. Human-like figures were scavenging through the refuse and ambling about. From head to foot they wore only the dirty brown shag that their burly bodies grew with such animal completeness. Their only adjuncts to obvious brute strength were heavy blue knives; held by a yellow rope about their hairy waists; and short black clubs, wickedly knotty and unbreakably tough. Vola's expression was one of contempt for it all.

To either side of the once proud City of Zolanda, clearings for farming and rectangles of orchards were deep in the process of being reclaimed by a strangling Nature. Red stone cliffs towered sheer from the far edges of the choking clearings and orchards. Joining the equally unscalable cliff back of the great temple and its gardens, they ran forward to square inward and

leave but a mere slit to whatever world might lie beyond this dead-ended canyon.

But Vola's thoughts went on. Would they never return! Days and nights she had watched—waited for word of success or failure!

Vola abruptly turned, resumed her surface calm stroll in the gardens, her Big Cats and Lora following in position. They were now passing on through a copse.

"A lovely evening, Queen Vola," ventured Lora. Her smooth-flowing voice was respectfully low.

Vola tossed away the plucked bloom. Her throaty contralto was royally cool. "Perhaps." Coming out of the copse, she saw the pair waiting near the bubbling spring just beyond. Her gray eyes iced. She heard Lora mutter a syllable of disgust, heard the Big Cats growl low and raspily in their collared throats as they now saw the hairy duo.

IN MOST respects they typified all Zolanda men. Their eyes were a bloodshot and lustfully hot green, were set deep in abnormally large heads. Their broad and flat features, their heavy and loose lips, were crooked and knotted from repeated fracturing and welting in lusty brawling, were near obscured by the dirtily matted shag. And it was only the hairy pair's burly breadth and heavy muscling that made them appear squat. Yet, leaning lazily on black club, other hairy hand toying his wicked knife, the self-sure leader of the duo bulked head and shoulders above his equally indolent lieutenant, and was broader again by a fourth. But as Gori was thus more a physical giant of degeneracy among a now degenerate breed, his lieutenant Zano's mien and eye bespoke a far more cunning shrewdness.

Gori's voice was the typical guttural growl. "Enjoying the evening, Queen Vol-a?"

Lora a respectful half pace to her right rear, Vol-a paused with imperial self-control, three paces clear. Her reply was an icy insinuation. "I was." Growling raspily, the Big Cats came up on her left and right and lowered close beside her. Small black ears laid back to great skulls, malevolent yellow eyes hating the accosters, the Big Cats' rippling shoulders were hunching. Light yellow fur of taut bellies brushing the flagstones, the beasts' quivering hind quarters were squatting for propulsion. Their tails were stiffening, the black tip ends twitching with thinly held anger.

Zano shifted his eyes quickly from the ready Big Cats. His guttural rasp was self-sure. "Queen Vol-a's pets seem upset about something, King Gori."

"But their mistress seems not upset about anything," Gori's eyes gleamed knowingly into Vol-a's.

Vol-a mocked the title. "Let King Gori keep in mind that the promise still has time in which to be fulfilled."

"It has to the full moon," pointed Gori, "which rises on the morrow."

Vol-a's voice carried a barbed insinuation. "Then let no one chance any action he may regret."

"The men of Zolanda," returned Gori, "grow ever more restless at the long lack."

Vol-a's eyes narrowed. Her voice was a cold purr. "Zolanda thinks a new Queen would be more expeditious?"

Lora's swift interjection was hot with fine loyalty. "Let all Zolanda know Lady Lora shall never accept the Temple throne while Queen Vol-a lives!"

"So again there is no encouragement, King Gori," slyly prompted Zano.

"Zolanda's men shall not rest well this night either," agreed Gori.

"It shall be as I have said," restated Vol-a with regal disdain. "At the next Luna Festival there shall be suitable prizes for every victorious gladiator."

The insinuation came into Gori's bloodshot green eyes. "Queen Vol-a's word is beginning to echo with emptiness."

STABBING back Gori's gaze, Vol-a coldly dismissed, "I'm sure King Gori's subjects await his immediate return." Her ready Big Cats crouched lower, tauted more. Their raspy growling became a low snarling of hate. Green eyes illy concealing their enmity, Gori and Zano slowly backed away. Vol-a's carmen lips were a sneer as she watched the shaggy giant and his cohort turn and amble leisurely into the tangled woods that clothed the steep slopes down to the City. Relaxing, standing up and stretching their tawny-orange lengths, the Big Cats fondly nuzzled Vol-a's hands.

Gray eyes considering her Queen, Lora stood by. Vol-a glanced up. "Your expression of loyalty shall not go unremembered, Lora."

Lora smiled smally, and glanced away. Just enough righteous indignation was in her voice. "Queen Vol-a's Big Cats could have permanently eliminated a most annoying pair."

Vol-a was regally amused. "Gori and Zano, whether they know it or not, are yet useful."

Lora dutifully admired her. "Queen Vol-a is most adroit."

Accepting the approval with royal indifference, Vol-a began strolling back toward the Temple, toward which the other priestesses were converging as the twilight darkened over the deep canyon and its holdings. Vol-a's glance swept again over the City far below, swept out and lingered again on the jungle-choked slit.

Would they never return to fulfill her promise! The brute men just would not wait much longer! Besides, there were her own—

Vola stiffened with expectancy, heard Lora give a hopeful exclamation, heard the other priestesses begin conjecturing excitedly. A Big Cat, collarless, had burst from the seemingly impenetrable jungle choking the slit, was racing down the broad way, was flashing through the City to arouse gesticulating speculation among the brute inhabitants, was speeding past the vast colosseum and streaking up for the Temple.

The great beast's yellow eyes were searching among the priestesses. Vola waved. With a short roar of fond recognition, the Big Cat was a tawny-orange streak through the gardens. Vola and Lora stood still as the great beast bounded softly to a stop before them. It began purring excitedly to Vola. She listened attentively, purring back to it—fluently conversing with it, questioning it and receiving its report. A small frown marked her disturbedness.

LIKE the other priestesses, many of whom were crowded around, Lora was unable to converse with the Big Cats. She anxiously queried, "Unwelcome news, Queen Vola?"

"Perhaps not," coolly considered Vola. "The beast reports a party is camping in the clearing just outside our canyon."

Lora tinged with trepidation. "Where are they from, Queen Vola?"

Vola was royally unperturbed. "Apparently from a great distance down the valley—certainly not from any of the cities up-valley. They ride in soft white chairs upon a monstrous black reptile. They wear brief garments in the color of the sun, and carry black

battle-axes and knives."

"Are they many, Queen Vola?" feared Lora.

"No," thoughtfully mused Vola. "Only two girls, exceptionally fair of form; one with hair like midday sunshine, the other with tresses like star-bathed midnight. They are accompanied by a pair of cleanly handsome and virile young men, hairless of tan physiques and keen countenances, but with midnight hair brushed sleek to their skulls. An old male servant, youthfully agile and vigorous, completes the party."

"The Big Cat lookout reports a most handsome group," considered Lora. "But," she feared, "they must be destroyed at once!"

"Lady Lora would move too rashly," chided Vola.

Flushing slightly, Lora turned her jealous eyes over the City below.

"Gori and the men truly are growing ever more restless," condescendingly said Vola. "And now the Fates present the means to prove to all Zolanda what my Big Cats can do—and so assure more time for my promise to be fulfilled." She saw Gori and Zano hurrying back.

"Queen Vola," loyally complimented Lora, "is indeed worthy of the Temple throne."

An odd, awakening hope kindled in Vola's eyes. "Besides, foreign males might have the touch that Zolanda's men lack."

As it did into the eyes of the nearby priestesses, so the light of daring to hope for the satisfying of a woman's deepest hungers came into Lora's gaze. "May Queen Vola's adroit mind find the way!"

Facing her patiently waiting lookout Big Cat, Vola began purring to it, receiving its affirmation. She gave it an encouraging final purr. Avoiding the

priestesses, it whirled for the Temple, bounded onto the terrace and flashed through the yawning doorway.

Lustfully excited and expectant, Gori and Zano were now within vocal distance. Vola's pair of collared Big Cats moved into lowly growling position beside her, and the hairy duo stopped.

"What was the report, Queen Vola?" eagerly asked Gori.

"Let King Gori watch the Temple doorway," taunted Vola.

At that moment the lookout Big Cat flashed out the great doorway, led a silently racing pack of the beasts across the terrace. Down the broad steps the tawny-orange monsters poured, down the broad white way and past the massive colosseum and on through the eagerly wondering City they streaked—and plunged from sight into the jungled slit leading to the great valley beyond the darkening canyon.

The filthy Gori gave the regally sure Vola a considering stare. And there was more than one worry revealed in his eye and guttural observation. "Queen Vola is well pleased with herself."

Vola served the shaggy giant a coolly taunting smile. "In a short time King Gori and his followers shall be satisfied also—most satisfied."

CHAPTER II

THE Big Snake grazed slowly about, almost obscured by the lush vegetation beyond the clearing. The great dinosaur was a black colossus, its armored scaliness glistening in the vanishing twilight. The great reptile's broad back was divided down the center with an erect line of huge horny triangles, base down, and becoming progressively smaller and vanishing altogether as they continued on down the monstrous tail. The Big Snake's heavy

long neck undulated sinuously, glided its huge and horny head here and there among the lush jungle in search of choice morsels for its yellow-toothed cavernous maw to savor. Its flaring pink nostrils softly drew in and exhaled deep draughts of the freshly perfumed evening air. Its huge red eyes, bulging amid protecting horniness, glowed with content and reflected the fire in the spacious clearing as they occasionally focused a fond glance for the party there.

The five woolly white chair-type saddles the Big Snake had worn during the day were stacked neatly near the fire, a white goatskin tent on each side, and other gear close by. Tending the wild boar turning on the spit was an elderly gentleman, whose grace of body and sparkling black eyes denied the years that his halo of silver-gray hair proved. Famed for his skill in cookery, Old Ledo was also noted for his dry jests, and was no novice in the use of battle weapons.

Lounging around on the cushiony grass were the four others of the party, mouths readying with anticipation for the young boar as it glistened juicy and its whetting aromas were wafted into their nostrils. The four were, like Old Ledo, free in action-slit briefs. Tailored from a feather-light cloth of golden iridescence, the attire emphasized the creamy-tan bodies. At the waists of the men, as at Old Ledo's, soft white goatsleather scabbards held long black stone battle knives conveniently ready.

As he sprawled companionably beside the black-haired beauty of Elees, the dark-haired rangy Rok inhaled eloquently. "Ummmmh—uh!" His strong voice was easy and clean. "Bet you can smell that porky all over the valley."

"And who or what," inquired his

melodic-voiced and comfortable Elees, "is there anywhere in this God-forsaken primitiveness to inhale of porky?"

Breathing deeply and expressively, the sun-blond Roy smiled dreamily. Her voice, musically lilting, matched her grace and beauty. "Only us, Elees—only us." After being coiffured at the temples and ears with blue-gemmed clips that matched her earrings and anklet, Roy's golden hair cascaded in shimmering waves to her smooth and lucent nudity of shoulders. On her left wrist glowed the exquisitely worked emerald bracelet of a Royal Princess of Sandcliff.

"Of course," excepted Roy's indolent partner, "there's the flora and fauna about us." His teasing voice was clear, its strength well controlled. He was Toka, First Prince of Sandcliff, the powerful but peaceful cliffed city that was now long days back down the valley.

Toka's creamy-tan body of superb muscle development was lithely lean and hard, was innately graceful even in indolence. His nerves and reflexes and perceptive senses were quick and superkeen, his eyes dark and dancing in a handsomely angular face. He was beardless, with dark hair brushed sleekly to his intelligent skull. His physical being, as was all Sandcliffians', was permeated throughout every vibrant tissue and fiber with a strength and endurance, with a healing power and health promoter miraculous in its efficacy. It had been obtained by a daily diet of black water berries, found near Sandcliff; it had become, so far as could be determined, permanent. And as Old Ledo was the exemplar of Sandcliff's elders, so Toka was the prime example of Sandcliff's prime warriors, and Roy the bewitching sample of its femininity.

"I DON'T know about the flora around us, pal," drawled Rok, "but I bet all the old faunas are drooling with envy."

"Let's hope they don't envy us too much," wished Elees. "Especially any old large faunas."

Smile mischievous, Roy's deeply blue eyes were vixens under their long golden lashes. "But, Elees—with Sandcliff's three most able warriors with us, what do we have to worry about?"

Elees's delicious lips quirked. "Only Sandcliff's three most able warriors." Her silkily lashed dark eyes were slyly dancing imps.

"Grrrrrrr," *menacingly* growled Rok at Elees.

"Gonna eat you up," *viciously* leered Toka at Roy.

Old Ledo straightened up, scowled bewildered as he quickly peered through the gear, the tent for the girls and the tent for himself and Toka and Rok; then he counted the party. His audience had obviously ceased their lazy fun and were staring at him.

"What are you looking for, Old Ledo?" led Elees.

"That other Sandcliff warrior," soberly returned Old Ledo.

"Other one?" elaborately gaped Rok.

"You mean we have a stowaway?" appropriately frowned Toka.

"Elees said she and Roy had to worry about Sandcliff's three most able warriors," reminded Old Ledo. "I'm looking for the other wolf."

"You old silly," rippled Roy, "you're the other one!"

Old Ledo was elaborately surprised. As the two couples enjoyed him, he became judiciously wary. "The females are scheming for a favor." He assumed an authoritative air. "They always try to butter a man up beforehand."

"We really must have a little talk with Old Ledo, eh, Rok?" soberly re-

parteed Toka, and enjoyed Roya's pinch to his ribs.

"It should broaden our knowledge of handling these wild females," solemnly agreed Rok, and cast a raised eyebrow of assumed disdain at Elees as the dark girl tweaked his ear.

Old Ledo struck a purposefully sober note. "But for tonight, we'd better use our knowledge of handling any unforeseen visitors."

With a swift glance, Toka keenly considered his wise old family servant. To Old Ledo, these four young people were as beloved children, though they were now grown to prime.

"All day we've hunted up this valley," derided the beauteous Elees with impish disrespect for Old Ledo. "And what did we find?"

"Just one ornery yet nonetheless lonesome little boar," answered Roya. Though her face was also disdainful, her vixen's eyes were fond for Old Ledo.

"And no sign of any man or man-attacking faunas," factually added Rok. "Or," he posed with a lazy grin that covered any possible concern, "maybe Old Ledo saw something we didn't?"

"All right, all right," wearily shrugged Old Ledo. It was a resignation Toka well knew was no resignation. "Go on and sprawl around there and tee-hee and blah-blah with each other—till some hungry old Big Cat comes jumping down your throats."

"Maybe Old Ledo's right at that," mused Toka over his agreement with the elderly servant. "After all, an old Big Cat would be rather hard to swallow." But there was not much to fear; not even a Big Cat—a crazed man-eating one—would dare approach fire.

brainless mutual admiration society this turned out to be!"

"Well," bridled Roya, "I like *that*!"

She was joined by Elees. "This is a hunting party—pure and simple!"

"Pure and simple," sarcastically mimicked Old Ledo. "Hah!"

"Old Ledo," slyly tittered Rok, "—the Protector of the Male Sex!" He twisted away from the flushed Elees' slap for his roguish face.

Toka soberly returned the indignantly blushing Roya's intent wide look. "I didn't say a thing."

"But," demanded Roya, "just what are you thinking?"

"I am thinking," solemnly replied Toka, "that somebody should ought to rustle a nice big heap of dry wood to keep the fire going all night."

"Now that," applauded Old Ledo as he turned from basting the boar, "is the first sensible statement I've heard all day."

"Why not," posed Rok as he lolled in luxurious indolence, "let a certain pair of beauteous wenches earn their fare?"

Toka added his bit. "About time, I'd say."

Pretty lips set, lovely eyes agleam, Roya and Elees looked their enjoyably sprawled companions up and down.

"And just who, my lazy lout," asked Elees, "flushed that there boar from cover?"

"You," solemnly stated Rok.

"And just who, my indolent louse," inquired Roya, "demised that there pig?"

"You," solemnly stated Toka.

"Blah, blah, blah!" Old Ledo thrust his roasting fork and basting ladle toward the twilight sky, then glared at his charges. "If you bunch of love-sick brats don't get that there wood in here before dark, I'll throw this here hog to that there Big Snake!"

OLD LEDO was snorting phlegmatic disgust with his charges. "What a

With impish grins for their "ferociously" scowling chaperon, the four stood up and shifted their displayfully brief attires into comfort. As the athletically lovely girls went over to their own tent, Toka and Rok stepped to theirs and picked up and effortlessly and innately hefted great battle-axes. The weapons were unbelievably tough of softly gleaming black wood handles, were chiplessly hard of wickedly gleaming black stone heads. They were double-headed, finely balanced; one head long and split-hair keen of ravenous blade, the opposite head wide and brutally knobbed. Toka's ax differed from Rok's in that it was exquisitely engraved of head and handle. His great black stone battle knife similarly contrasted of hilt to his friend's. Roya and Elees had their hunting axes in hand, light weapons in the pattern of Toka's and Rok's.

"Okay," grinned Toka, "let's—"

HIS warrior nerves screamed a warning through him. He tauted, centered his narrowed eyes for the Big Snake. It was nowhere to be seen or heard. There was not even the whisper of bird wings or scamper of an animal foot. The steadily darkening jungle had suddenly silenced, was poised, waiting. The throb of the distant river and the chuckling of the nearby brook were starkly loud.

Old Ledo had carefully yet swiftly put down his fork and ladle, taken his own great black battle-ax in hand and joined the others in eyeing the dense dark undergrowth and thickly crowded shadows of the towering palms which ringed the large clearing.

Toka's sensitive fighter-being was singing with readiness, his superkeen faculties straining to detect the causes. His swift mentality spun with thought. Could his and Rok's skilled eyes have

overlooked something in this never-before-explored section of the valley? Old Ledo—had his anxiety at their too-carefree funning been more real than they thought? Toka met the loyal old servant's intent gaze.

The fine old warrior's voice was low, deceptively lazy, but true. "I didn't know."

The intent-faced Rok softly assured, "None of us did, Old Ledo."

"So silent," breathed the taut-bodied dark Elees.

"Like everything is waiting," whispered the poised Roya, "and watching and getting ready."

"Don't even hear our Big Snake," quietly puzzled Toka.

Forking fingers to mouth, Rok split the taut silence with a shrill whistle.

Toka's superkeen hearing waited for the Big Snake's happily answering roar. There was not even the colossal reptile's peaceful rumblings, nor the champing of its grazing maw, nor the occasional stomp of its feet. What could have happened to the quick-reflexed and powerfully muscled monster?

"Rok," quietly decided Toka, "you and Old Ledo stay here with the girls."

The eyes of Rok, the inseparable in danger, blazed his yen to accompany his friend, but he obediently nodded.

"Do be careful, Toka," quietly feared Roya.

Toka found what he hoped was an assuring smile. "I'll be right back, dear. It's probably nothing really dangerous." No one believed that last; how could they?

Sweeping the ominous jungle with an intent glance, detecting nothing, Toka pendulumed his great battle-ax easily and stepped for the direction where the Big Snake had last been seen and—

HE HEARD the quick cries of Roya and the others as he saw the

monstrous feline forms suddenly flashing from the depths of the edging jungle. The blackly banded tawny-orange bodies were extended in great leaps. Their needle-keen long claws were gleaming wickedly. The great yellow eyes were blazing green hate. The down-curving long foreteeth were glistening ravenously.

In the split moment it took to whirl back to Roya and the others, Toka knew these were no ordinary Big Cats. The fire meant nothing to them. There had been no smell of them, not even a hunting roar, not even their blood-curdling roars at the moment of this first leap to the kill. And what sort of Big Cats were organized to approach so silently and tracklessly—with such even deployment of the pack! From every direction the absolutely silent big beasts were bounding across the clearing, were monstrous creatures of violently destructive powers.

"Is this going to be something!" The grim but cool Rok was poised, battle-ax a hissing blur about his sleek head.

"I'd like to meet the one that put them up to this," dryly observed old Ledo.

The outlook was ominous enough to all. But as his flexible wrist and hand twirled his black battle-ax of renown about his head and poised for the attack to ring in, Toka tried to put confidence into his quietly cool observation. "Perhaps we'll do a little visiting after this nice party."

Roya and Elees said nothing. In one split instant, Toka and Rok and Old Ledo had become a freely spaced triangle about the brave-faced and taut-bodied girls. Further directions were superfluous; the girls would not panic or interfere; Rok and Old Ledo would conduct themselves with every skill. They were like Toka himself—surging with the mighty powers for battle.

Still the pack of Big Cats made no sound but the rustly plumping of their great clawed feet against the cushiony grass as they leaped in. The lead Big Cat flashed into range. Toka whistled his great battle weapon for the beast. But the Big Cat did not recoil. It flattened to the grass for the split moment the battle-ax took to hiss above its skull, then was springing straight for Toka. And its wickedly toothed maw was not open to slash, the claws of its flailing forepaws no longer unsheathed to rip. With supreme speed and skill Toka had his whistling battle-ax around again and was blurring it for the leaping Big Cat's skull. The blazing-eyed beast convulsed in midair. Toka skillfully deflected his angrily hissing ax. Up his arm and through his fighting being flashed the nerve-tingling satisfaction as the ravenous blade crashed into that black-splotched tawny-orange head and bit on through, spilled the gray brains and sent the huge body rolling to bloody death.

From their muttered ejaculations as they drove their angrily hissing battle-axes crashing and chucking home, Rok and Old Ledo were evidently likewise strained by the organized Big Cats' unnatural skill. Yet Toka had no time to risk a glance for his fellows. The Big Cats were a wild sea of great tawny-orange bodies surging in, surging in with a verve and teamwork that was evilly superb. With fearful skill they dodged, flattened, sparred with their great forepaws.

In reflex, a decapitated Big Cat unsheathed its claws as its headless body convulsed at Toka's feet. In split-instant speed Toka shifted from the long needle-keen claws, but instantly had to ax another attacker and those dead claws ripped him deeply from thigh to knee. But there was no pain, no loss of more than drops of blood; the

ghastly wound healed scarlessly sound even as Toka powered his bloody ax through the next massive head.

A GAIN and again without pause Toka's speeding ax took its vicious toll in great severed paws and sliced legs, in broken teeth and torn eyes and spilled brains. Blood and gore rained and soaked the grass slick, drenched Toka's swiftly fighting body. Yet over and around the piled carcasses more Big Cats flashed on in with silent fury and abnormally skilled determination—forcing Toka ever back, as he knew Rok and Old Ledo were being forced back.

With cool fierceness Toka powered his great battle-ax ever faster. But even in the blazing yellow eyes of the tawny-orange attackers he could read that they, too, saw the end was near. And the bitterness at Roya meeting such a terrible and inexplicable fate scalded Toka's soul.

"Give them more!" he rallied, and plumbed his own depths of miraculous strength to decapitate the next Big Cat, and the next. . .

But on charged more of the great beasts. The expedition's tents and gear, the boar and spit and the supposedly protecting fire were scattered and shattered away. And the dusk was becoming the purple cloak of night, lit only by the stars above and the green flames of hate in yellow eyes down here.

Toka heard Roya's emotionally quivering voice assuring, "We'll be together always, dearest."

Toka savagely drove his great black battle-ax for their lives. But again he had to give before the ceaseless fury. His voice was husky with realization of their situation. "Forever, my darling."

"At least we'll have eternity, Rok," vowed Elees.

"Maybe I'll give you a better break

there, Elees," hoped Rok with hoarse bitterness.

Old Ledo gasped savagely. Roya's and Elees' screams knifed through Toka. Slashing at a swiftly weaving Big Cat's sparring forepaws, missing, Toka whirled for Roya, Rok had likewise whirled for his Elees. Old Ledo was nowhere. Toka's glance was filled with the sight of Roya and Elees sopped red with blood and sprawled on the gore-slick grass. A Big Cat with great wickedly toothed maw open was at each girl. Out of the night other Big Cats were surging on around them and for the battling Toka and Rok. The beasts at Roya and Elees were each taking one of the girls in its horrible mouth, were hefting the lolling bodies and leaping away into the purple blackness of this wild night.

Rok was leaping with anguished desperation for Elees. But Toka saw his gore-drenched friend, backgrounded by a wave of tawny-orange monsters, go down—felled by a great paw slapping with dull violence to the back of his roiled-haired skull.

The sea of Big Cats jammed on in. The knocked-out Rok was being taken by a Big Cat. Bitter and sick with all this defeat, Toka drove his great battle-ax in a last wild desperation as he forged for his friend. But a terrible force struck the rear of his own head. Violently brilliant lights of varied hue exploded his senses. The night of triumphantly churning Big Cats reeled, and the pit of black oblivion yawned wide and engulfed Toka into its endless depths.

CHAPTER III

THE swirling blackness clutched fiendishly at Toka as his senses began battling it away. But his powers grew stronger, forged through to con-

sciousness. As the recollections rushed back with stark clarity, Toka carefully kept his body lax, his eyes closed, his features passive. His perceptive senses were once more clear and strong. He was supine, unbound, on some sort of leathery smooth softness. A mellow light, as of dawning day, filtered through his shut eyelids. The only sounds were songs of birds, the tumbling water, occasionally human voices—all clear but frail with distance. As he breathed of the morning-cool clean air, he caught a flower scent.

His body felt uninjured, his head held no ache, although the miracle healing power that his being possessed would account for that. Yet oddly, there was no feel of the gore and blood of battle on him; his body felt fresh and clean, as after bathing. A slightly deeper breath expanded his relaxed lower abdominal muscles, moved his familiarly silken briefs against his skin. So he yet wore his shorts of Sandcliff. But the absence of the familiar weight of his scabbarded battle knife was a feeling of stark nakedness. He barely flexed his toes, and yet wore his mesh sandals. But strain his perceptions as he might, he could sense nothing.

Feigning blowsy semi-consciousness, Toka fluttered his eyelids, rolled his noting eyes, twitched his feeling hands about. He was alone, in a bare cell of smoothly fitted stone, its low ceiling and close walls a creamy-white, its narrow length of floor blue. Face-high and to the right above his feet, a heavily barred small blue window in the pace-thick wall welcomed azure sky and clean air. Two paces back of his head and at the other end of the cell, a large blue door, its stoutly grilled peephole shuttered on the other side, secured the prisoner. Toka sat a further

orienting moment on the side of his plain but comfortable low bunk of blue stone and leather, which was built to the left wall and footed into the corner. The furnishings were completed by a beautiful long-necked green urn, half filled with sparkling clear water, and standing on the floor beside the head of the bunk.

Toka went to the door. His hearing found only silence beyond. The one-piece smooth panel had no pull, no lock or hinges discernible from this side. The heavy bars of the door's peephole were set no more than a finger's width apart, and the blue stone shutter beyond was immovable. Toka braced his feet, set his shoulder against the door, strained his powerful body harder and harder, till his sets of muscles ridged and knotted with tremendous effort. The door never budged.

Toka was across to the small window. In the sun-bright and warming morning, his superkeen eyes took in the sheer-walled red canyon boxing in run-down farmlands surrounding a squalid but once beautiful city of blue and creamy-white stone. He took in the massive blue and white colosseum, and the exquisite gardens surrounding the base of this cubically towering blue and white structure in which he was imprisoned. The gardens were deserted, but in the streets of the city so far below, hairy brutes in human form, armed with black clubs and ugly blue knives, scavenged about, singly and in quarreling groups. There was no sign or hint of any Big Cats.

Again Toka recalled the futile but bloody battle against the pack of amazingly adroit beasts. Were Roya and the others of the party safe? He fervently prayed so!

He looked at himself. All bloodiness and soil had been cleansed from him. Even his iridescently golden shorts

were spotless. During his unconsciousness he had been completely bathed, his attire laundered. And his battle knife taken. By those filthy subhuman brute men? The vision of Roya's blonde loveliness bared to their hands and eyes boiled Toka's blood!

HE GRASPED the window's thick stone bars, strained his tremendous strength at them—vainly. And even if he could wrench them out, the opening was far too small to pass him.

Toka went to the urn, picking it up. He tauted as a gentle stony click sounded on the other side of his cell door. Holding the heavy urn by its graceful neck, Toka poised ready. The peephole shutter swung aside. Regally fine feminine features, enhanced by softly shining palomino hair braided into a gemless crown, anxiously swept the cell, and brightened as the luminous deep gray eyes found the occupant up and alert.

The exotic woman's voice was musically clear and low. "You will accompany me."

As Toka alertly waited, the shutter clicked back into place. There was a second gentle stony click, and the heavy blue door swung quietly out. The proudly tall and beautifully matured woman, shameless in lustrous black scants under diaphanous silvery gown, stood waiting in a blue-floored and dim white corridor. The woman was accompanied by a Big Cat that was, except for a black mesh collar of flashing jewels, similar to the ones that had attacked so successfully—was it last evening? The great fore-toothed beast stood ready, wrist-thick tail sinuous, large yellow eyes blazing green hate at the prisoner. Toka paused, estimating the monstrous feline.

"It will not touch you now," quietly

assured the woman, "unless you disobey."

The Big Cat was obviously obedient to her. Toka set down the urn and easily but alertly sauntered forward. With supple grace the woman cleared to one side, the beast to the other, and Toka stepped out. Blue cell doors, opened back against the white walls, evenly spaced the wide low corridor as it ran away right and left, to great blue gratings securing each end.

With a strangely hungering glance for Toka, the woman softly ordered, "Follow me."

She led the way left up the deserted corridor of empty cells. Closely trailed by the silent and fancily collared Big Cat, the observant Toka followed. Even the soft padding of the beast's feet, the quiet treading of Toka's and the woman's sandals, even the silken rustle of her gossamer gown, were strangely magnified and carried clearly.

A red inlay was pressed to unlock the heavy grating at the corridor's end. There, a large landing from which blue stone stairways apparently wound up and down inside the corner of this structure, also gave into another grating corridor of apparently empty cells running away to the right; evidently the corridors squared all the way around, a landing and stairway system and gratings at each corner.

AT LAST down to the high-vaulted ground floor of the massive structure, the woman paused at a pair of large blue doors, touched red inlays in the ornate panels, then swung the great doors wide. A vast and exotic dining hall, blue and white and brilliant with sunlight through tall wide windows, was displayed end on.

In the sudden silence Toka's gaze leaped to Roya. Her blonde preciousness was fresh, revealingly untarnished.

The apparently unharmed others of the party were waiting in fancy blue chairs at a brilliantly set great blue table. Its foot, at which were seated a hairy pair, was toward Toka. Roya and Elees and a silvery gowned and moderately jeweled woman were along the right-hand side, Rok and Old Ledo and vacant place along the left.

Eyes wary, mien casual, Toka's comrades glanced around at sound of the doors softly opening. At sight of him they stood up, but remained at their fancy chairs, their faces silently exclaiming their gladness at his return among them. Each was restrained by the malevolently alert presence of a Big Cat, uncollared, sitting on the floor two paces behind each. A score of silvery gowned exotic women like Toka's escort, evidently servants, stood quietly about, waiting, luminous gray eyes on Toka. Eyes mating Roya's, visually embracing each other, Toka checked his own gladness.

A throaty contralto rippled coolly from the head of the great table. "Please enter and be seated, Prince Toka."

Facing the gracefully tall, the brilliantly jeweled, the imperially beautiful woman in a gossamer gown of lustrous royal-blue, Toka sauntered toward the designated place next beyond Rok. "You know my name?" tested Toka.

The imperial one smiled her ego. "I know all your names. You all had very informative moments of delirium last night."

Rok posed the proposition. "We're to be plied with breakfast."

The captives were patently too valuable to be harmed—yet. "I'm sure we'll enjoy it." Trailed by a Big Cat, eyes missing nothing, Toka kept his expression and voice easy. "But to whom do we owe this unique form of hospitality?"

The royal woman was faintly amused. "Queen Vola, High Priestess of the Royal Temple of Zolanda."

The only other collared Big Cat sat ready just to her right rear, and was anything but hateful when it eyed her. The Big Cats that were watching Old Ledo and Rok gave Toka no heed as he passed behind them; his own silently guarding beast would take care of him.

As Toka stood at his place, Vola continued the introductions with royal indifference. "On my left, Lady Lora."

The deeply gray eyes of the slightly less royal woman held Toka with that strangely hungering light.

"And of course," casually added Vola, "your own party—well and comfortable."

"So far," cordially acknowledged Toka.

Vola's regal eyes shrewdly estimated him an instant. "And the handsome pair at the foot of the table—King Gori of Zolanda, and his lieutenant Zano."

CATCHING Vola's oddly significant note of mockery, Toka considered the pair, each also attended by a ready Big Cat. The filthiness and degeneracy of the brutes were accented even more by these clean and brilliant surroundings. Briefly and derisively returning Toka's nod, the giant Gori and apparently normally subnormal but more cunning-eyed Zano resumed feasting their bloodshot hot green eyes over the pure creamy-tan loveliness of Roya and Elees.

Toka fought his anger from showing. With the standing others, he now sat down. With those queerly starved looks straying to the cleanly virile Sandcliff males, the sleek and bosomy silvery gowned women began serving the table with fancy green trays of exotic but appetite-inviting assortments

of foods and beverages. Meeting Roya's eyes, reading the stark worry in their brave blue depths, Toka tried for an expression of easy confidence. He was rewarded to see Roya's expression relax a bit as she began toying with her breakfast, as she even ate a little nourishment.

Vola addressed Toka with apologetic concern. "I'm afraid my Big Cats hit you harder than the others, Prince Toka. But you are feeling well this morning, I see."

"So far." The goblet of delicately spiced cocoa was appetizingly good, the toasted stars of flavored breads and sweet honey intriguingly excellent.

Vola's eyes included all, then held Toka. "The termination of your well-being shall be largely of your own doing."

Toka easily held his gaze as he set down his goblet. "That may depend on what is done to us."

"You were not harmed during your unconsciousness, were you?"

Reading the insinuation in her eyes, Toka felt the warmth of embarrassment seeping into his face. He carefully centered on enjoying halved pears in fruit syrup and honey.

"You, too, were cared for only by myself and some of my priestesses." Vola designated Lora and the serving women with a graceful arm. "I see they find you most intriguing."

They obviously found Gori and Zano anything but desirable. But Toka was relieved to know the women had attended Roya and Elees. Yet the flush burned disconcertingly in his face.

He was glad for Rok's laconic, "Nice people, Toka."

"Very interesting." Toka cast a glance down table. Deceptively lazy black eyes missing nothing, Old Ledo only ate. Beyond him, Gori and Zano noisily hogged down all the superb

nourishment the priestesses kept bringing them. Obviously aware of the lust-filled green eyes devouring them, Roya and Elees centered on their food, now and then meeting the reassuring eyes of their men, Elees Rok's, Roya Toka's. Lora, directly across from Toka, lingered her gaze again and again on him with that discomforting speculation, as did the serving priestesses, only little less. Only little less speculatively did they consider the clean male handsomeness of Rok and Old Ledo. Toka traveled his eyes back to Vola, the obvious brain behind all this blackly mysterious and evilly ominous situation.

"And our Big Snake?" he politely inquired.

"My swift-striking Big Cats enjoyed it," assured Vola.

"Without leaving a trace?" suggested Toka.

"My Big Cats are most thorough," assured Vola. "The reptile's bones, as well as your equipment and the other remains at the scene of your remarkable resistance, were brought to the Temple."

The germs for an escape plan began gestating in Toka's mind. "And the trained eyes of searching parties?" he posed.

VOLA shrugged her imperially beautiful shoulders. "Any searching party from your distant Sandcliff would not start for several days at least, and they would find nothing to tattle the fate of their Prince Toka and party." She smiled faintly. "The disturbed jungle regrows quickly—even in a day."

It was all too horribly true. Toka softened his frown with a jocular smile. "But why?"

Vola was carelessly factual. "You and your party were in the way."

"In the way of what?"

"My plan for Zolanda."

"That isn't very clear."

"But you shall see it all very soon."

She fixed a coolly challenging expression to the bottom of the table. "Don't you think so, King Gori?"

The hairy giant had evidently been listening as he wolfed his food and savored Roya. He grinned loosely in his facial shag, fingered his dirty yellow teeth. His guttural reply was faintly insolent. "King Gori now believes Queen Vola's hunts will soon succeed." His bloodshot green eyes despised Toka's clean manliness. "But whether or not your captive Prince sees it is not for King Gori to say."

Toka's swift mind pondered the possible relationship between Vola and Gori; obviously there was some rivalry; there was even a vague feeling of something not quite true between Gori and Zano.

"Queen Vola," she pointedly accepted, "welcomes King Gori's new confidence."

"However," insinuated Gori, "it would be best if Queen Vola's plans begin bearing fruit very soon." His hot green eyes swung over Roya's pure beauty. "Very soon."

The surfacely laconic Rok tested Gori. "Something in it for you and the boys, bud?"

Gori fixed his clean questioner with a malevolent leer, then chuckled as he returned his savoring gaze to Roya and Elees.

The loosely smirking Zano mocked Rok and Toka. "King Gori and his followers expect much of Queen Vola's plan—very much." He, too, chuckled gutturally and returned to eyeing Roya and Elees.

Rok coolly regarded Vola. "Such as?"

"You shall all see in due time." Vola gave Rok an enigmatic smile. "And

King Gori and his men are not the only ones of Zolanda who shall benefit."

"Meaning?" easily challenged Rok.

"The priestesses of the Temple of Zolanda may also benefit—now."

Toka was too aware of Vola's undressing gray eyes playing over him, of Lora's doing likewise, of the other priestesses in like manner over him and Rok and Old Ledo.

Toka heard Rok, no doubt seething with the same angry helplessness, evenly express the point. "You know, Queenie old thing, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if your old plan required quite a little laundering."

The imperially sure Vola was amused at Rok, but her anticipating gaze was too intimately on Toka. "I'm sure you and Toka shall find it interesting." She glanced significantly to Lora. "Don't you think so, Lady Lora?"

Drawing her lustrous eyes from the male captives, Lora met her Queen's insinuating gaze. "I'm sure all of us shall enjoy it, Queen Vola."

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS the bright warming hour after breakfast as Lora strolled along the flagstone path in the lower east corner of the gardens. The other priestesses were not near, were busy at tasks in the towering Temple, or in other parts of the gardens. The morning birds sang, the day flowers colored the green scene and scented the clean air. But Lora was within her thoughts. Her gray eyes were aching with the desperately hoping hunger, her features dark with the gnawing envy. Her feet passed her through the copse, took her on toward the bubbling spring.

"A lovely morning, Lady Lora." The hairy brown Zano lounged on his club

as he waited beside the sparkling water. His bloodshot green eyes laughed at her quick fear. "Do not be alarmed. I, too, am alone."

Lora stood taut. Her regal body was ready for flight, but was held by a need of displaying her royal superiority. Her voice was as cold as her eyes. "What is Zano doing here now?"

Zano's loose lips quirked in his facial shag. "Waiting for Lady Lora."

"King Gori sent you?"

"No one sent me," adroitly assured Zano. "I alone required counsel with Lady Lora."

This suggestion of her importance took Lora. "What can Zano want of me?"

Zano's cunning eyes lusted. "Lady Lora has knowledge of the Temple and its captives."

Lora's eyes narrowed guessingly. "So?"

"The captives are well guarded?"

"Except for the cells which they occupy, the entire twelfth floor is yet empty." Lora's passion-full lips twitched. "But Queen Volá's Big Cats are most competent—as Zano and King Gori should know."

Zano scowled at the fresh memories of Volá's great felines escorting him and his giant King from the Temple after that breakfast. But quickly returning to his insinuating cunningness, he tested, "The Prince Toka is also well cared for?"

Lora's eyes smoldered her hungers. "Very well cared for."

"By Queen Volá?"

Lora's expression betrayed her hot jealousy. "Does not the Queen always serve herself first?"

"And the lesser priestesses are to have only the ones known as Rok and Old Ledo?"

Lora's burning envy was in her sneer. "We lesser priestesses are to

compete during the Luna Festival. The winners shall have first chance at Rok and Old Ledo. The others, in the order in which we place in the competition, shall then take them for our pleasures."

Zano waited, slyly considering Lora, letting her taste again the dregs of her jealousy. "The other priestesses approve?"

Lora smiled sardonically. "And if they dared not?"

"If Queen Volá were not High Priestess," mused Zano, "she would not have the Prince Toka."

"And with her plan for Zolanda now flowering so beautifully," mocked Lora, "what could depose Queen Volá—save the hand of Death?"

"The hand of Death," cunningly echoed Zano. "Perhaps Lady Lora has a thought worth further developing."

Lora taut as the thought which her subconscious had expressed returned and struck her awareness. Her features paled, but the temptation began to kindle in her eyes.

Zano watched with a silent chuckling.

Savagely recalling herself from the brink, Lora fixed Zano with a cold narrow gaze. "Zano thought he could make Lady Lora murder Queen Volá for King Gori?"

ZANO'S shock was remarkably well expressed for such a degenerate being. "King Gori nor Zano voiced no such thoughts against Queen Volá! Lady Lora expressed them."

The fear of her Queen's possible judgment was in Lora's eyes now.

"Lady Lora need have no fear of Zano," slyly chuckled Zano. "And I'm sure Zano need have no fear of Lady Lora."

Looking with distaste on this degenerate beast with which she had so

stupidly compromised her position, Lora icily assured, "Zano has trapped well this morning!"

Eyes amused, Zano quirked his loose lips. "Lady Lora and Zano could work well together—against certain ones."

Turning her regal back on him, Lora swished her angry imperial way toward the Temple.

Zano's guttural carried clearly across the quiet lawn. "At the hour midpoint between the sun's zenith and setting, Zano shall be waiting here for Lady Lora."

The voluptuous Lora paused her angry going, never turned, continued on.

The seeds sown, the smirking Zano ambled back into the tangled woods clothing the steep slopes down to the degenerate City.

CHAPTER V

BARE brown feet treading with animal silence, Zano swaggered self-importantly along the refuse-littered and sun-hottened blue sidewalks. He condescendingly acknowledged the grunts, guttural greetings and indolent gestures of the dirty, hairy, scavenging men of Zolanda, and stepped over or around dozing others. Coming to the debris-ugly garden of one of the more ornately facaded cubiform blue and white low buildings near the center of the City, Zano turned up the flagstone walk. Mounting the three steps, he avoided a loosely sprawled, lax-mouthed brute lacking one foot at the ankle. Carefully noting One Foot was evidently deep in sleep, shaggy head nearest the doorstep, Zano tapped an almost inaudible short triple beat on the fancily carved blue door.

A moment, a softly stony click, and the wide door swung into dirty white dimness. Zano swaggered in with a

loose grin. Nodding approval, Gori ambled over and sprawled on a filthy bed of rags, shreds of hides and scatterings of yellowed grass in a far corner of the scummy blue floor. Shutting the door, pressing a red inlay to lock it, Zano slouched down on a nearby nest of the filth. The stench and squalor of the one large room was normal to the kind now; but the blue casement windows on each side, the lone rear door, like the front one, were neatly and securely shuttered and latched. The lone ventilation was from two long slots in the dirty white walls above fore and rear door, and a splinter of space under the front door—beyond which slept One Foot.

Gori studied Zano. "Well?"

"I encountered Lady Lora," savored Zano.

"And?"

"As King Gori so wisely perceived, Lady Lora's jealousy has again compromised her with Zano—and only Zano, so she believes."

Gori chuckled gutturally.

Zano bathed in his King's apparent approval. "At the mid-hour between the sun's zenith and setting, I am to tryst again with Lady Lora."

Gori's eyes narrowed with patent enjoyment. "And Zano shall begin cultivating the seeds he has planted."

"And soon," savored Zano, "King Gori shall reap his harvest."

Gori's bloodshot green eyes were licentiously quipping at Zano. "Especially the beautiful blonde harvest."

Zano's green eyes rolled away from his King, lest that giant see a light there. "Zano is sure the fair Roya will give great pleasure to King Gori. But," he shrugged with eloquent longing, "what of King Gori's good Zano?"

The lolling Gori considered his tool. "The dark Elees should prove quite entertaining."

Smirking his appreciation, Zano made his eyes meet Gori's with an anticipating expression. "King Gori has not forgotten his Zano."

Gori guttured generously, "And Zano shall be second in command of all Zolanda, and later—all the world."

Zano even excelled his previous expression. "Truly! King Gori alone is born to rule Zolanda and all races!"

Gori indolently filched a slimy bone from his litter, began gnawing on it, his blood-redded green eyes thoughtful. Eyes shifting about the squalor, Zano scavenged a fly-blown shred of meat, plopped the horrible thing into his slobbering mouth, began cuddling.

"My men of Zolanda," worried Gori, "They are yet loyal, despite the long waiting for the moment?"

"Loyal indeed," assured Zano, "to the last one. And since seeing last evening's performance of Queen Vola's Big Cats, they are even more certain of their need for King Gori."

Gori eased his worry, at least superficially, and grinned around his slimy bone. "Even Queen Vola aids King Gori."

"Truly," fed Zano, "all signs are for King Gori." He mused thoughtfully as he cuddled his chaw of rotten meat. "But what fate for the three Sand-cliff males?"

SWIPING one huge-fingered hairy paw across his heavy lips, Gori fingered his ugly knife against his filthy belly. "King Gori and his loyal followers shall have sport with them."

Rising, Zano shifted his eyes about, lest Gori see a certain light in them. "King Gori has decided well." Spitting out his cud of rotten meat, he ambled to the front door.

Gori stretched lazily on his bed of filth. "King Gori shall await Zano's next report."

Before pressing the inlay to unlatch the door, Zano lingered his now-loyal eyes on his King's hairy countenance. "Zano shall do his best."

Gori grunted, closed his eyelids and laxed his loose mouth, as if for slumber. Zano stepped out, drew the door shut. Descending the steps to the walk, he only absently noted the indolent One Foot was no longer sprawled on them. But a commotion, beginning nearest the canyon's slit entrance, was drawing the awake numbers of brute men toward the highway. Zano quickly followed.

CHAPTER VI

WATCHFULLY trailed by the fancily collared Big Cat assigned to him, the other one going ahead, Toka was indifferent as he accompanied the gracefully tall and voluptuously regal Vola into exotically luxurious quarters off the great dining hall. The memories of the recent finale in that brilliant place were fresh in Toka's mind.

Softly, yet with the imperial commands thinly veiled in polite suggestion, Vola had dispersed the hairy giant and his shifty-eyed and equally dirty friend; had banished the no doubt fearing but well self-controlled Roya and Elees back to their cells; then the noncommittal but ready-for-anything Old Ledo and the derisively confident Rok to their imprisonment. Each "guest" had been led by one of the voluptuous priestesses and closely guarded by a malevolently ready Big Cat, to which Vola had gestured and purred in obviously fluent conversation.

And now the bejeweled Vola and pair of smart pets were escorting the fifth prisoner forward through the exotic ground floor of the Temple—and into just what?

Again the leading Big Cat raised a forepaw, pressed red inlays, and opened wide the third pair of ornate blue doors through which they had passed from the dining hall. This time, they went into a vast lounging room. Again the trailing Big Cat followed through, swung the great doors softly to. There was a stony click as they latched. Bright golden sunshine poured through the large east and south casement windows. Closely set with heavy bars, the high and wide openings made sun-slatted shadows on the gleaming blue floor and white walls, on the sumptuous furnishings of blue and white stone and lustrous woods, cloth and leathers.

Immodestly diaphanous gown swishing silkily about her, Vola displayed herself on a lounge beside a south window. Her Big Cat lowered to its haunches close by. Toka paused beside an ornate table back in the center of the room. Here, as where they had passed on this ground floor, the air was scented, unfouled by the normally strong smell of the Big Cats.

"Rather queer," Toka leisurely cataloged the room in search of weapons, makeshift or otherwise.

A small frown furrowed Vola's royal brow. "Queer?"

"Your Big Cats." Toka idled about, searching for a way, but ever guarded by one great feline. "No smell."

Vola's ego had been touched. "They are sprayed daily with a counter-scent that I and my priestesses have developed."

"So the beasts will be less odorous and less easily detected by their intended victims," pointedly addended Toka.

"Of course." The unperturbed Vola purred to the Big Cats. The tawny-orange beasts strode to the closed doors and lay down, great feet under them for comfortable readiness, large green-

blazing yellow eyes on Vola and her captive.

Having paused during this, Toka idled toward the east windows. He didn't care for that manner in which Vola's luminous gray eyes hungered over him. "Remarkable Big Cats," he tested.

Vola was freely informative. "On the day of my birth, my mother, then High Priestess here, obtained the first pair. They, too, were but half a day old. My mother raised the three of us at once, at her own breasts. And as she intended, I and the Big Cats grew to understand one another. You now see that first pair of Big Cats before the doors."

Turning from having surveyed the east gardens and canyon wall, Toka politely considered the great beasts. "And how many others?"

"Several thousand grown ones." Toka felt Vola's too-intimate gaze playing over him. "My first pair recruited more from the jungle—and they bred, naturally."

"Can any of the other Priestesses command the Big Cats?" tested Toka.

"Only by gesture," freely admitted Vola, "which the beasts obey only so long as I have commanded them to do so."

"And should you suddenly be—deposed?" dared Toka.

Vola was only amused. "In that very unlikely event, who knows?"

FULLY aware of the Big Cats watching his every move and waiting for any command from their mistress, Toka idled to the south windows. "But what is the meaning of all this?"

"You see the City of Zolanda and its farms and orchards, far below there?"

Toka was sweeping his superkeen gaze across the broad terrace and down

over the canyon floor and its holdings. "Quite a contrast to your Temple and gardens."

Contempt toned Vola's voice. "It is the same contrast as that between King Gori and Zano to me and my priestesses."

"Gori and Zano speak rather flowery," quested Toka.

"It is all any of the men have left from days of higher ideals," assured Vola.

If he and his fellow captives could somehow locate and recover their weapons and get outside this Temple and into those thick woods, decided Toka, escape might not be too hazardous. Yet— "King Gori your husband?" he laconically baited.

A daring hope, of certain sorts, veined Vola's voice. "Why does Prince Toka ask that?"

Shrugging, wondering at what he had detected, Toka idled to another window, peered interestedly out. "You're Queen—he's King."

Vola's imperial nostrils twitched her despite. "I alone am the royally consecrated ruler of all Zolanda. Gori titled himself King—of the degenerates of the City. I," she softly offered, "have never been mated."

Ignoring the implication, seething with restlessness, Toka frowned. "I still don't understand all this."

Vola was amused. "Are there any women among the hairy males of the City?"

"Not outside the houses."

"Nor in them."

Lounging on the deep casement, Toka faced Vola on the nearby lounge. "So?"

"The only women of Zolanda are the priestesses of the Temple. The only men are the brutes of the City." Vola watched for the point to dawn.

Catching a glimmering, not liking it,

Toka waited.

Vola's lips quirked. "There are no children either. There have been none for near a generation."

RUNNING his eyes along the unreachably lofty rim of the canyon, Toka dryly observed, "Apparently the City and the Temple don't get together." He could hardly blame the cleanly sleek priestesses, with those hairy brown animals that were scavenging through the City's squalor.

"It is not that it hasn't been tried many times," assured Vola with obvious distaste, "but that the priestesses of the Temple suddenly lost the response." With discomfiting inflection, she addended, "—at least to the men of Zolanda."

"Are there no other cities near?" insinuated Toka.

"Several up the valley. And now we know of your choice Sandcliff, so far down the valley."

"These near cities are unfriendly?"

"Would your delectable Sandcliff women welcome the men of Zolanda?"

"You and your priestesses are so undesirable to the men of the cities up valley?"

"Would Sandcliff's virile men desire barren women?"

Toka did not risk a reply to that. "Looks like Zolanda will vanish."

"Zolanda shall not vanish."

Toka considered the intensely sure Vola. "No?"

The educating Vola saw the future with vivid confidence. "Zolanda's men shall have mates to beget children, who shall grow into warriors and women to beget more warriors and women."

"A few obstacles, aren't there?"

"My Big Cats are out now, overcoming the first."

A lustfully joyous shout came up, frail with distance, from the City. At

once the tall voluptuous Vola was beside Toka at the window, eagerly sweeping her gaze toward the canyon's slit entrance. With superkeen eyes, Toka watched the pack of Big Cats pouring from the bottom of that slit and loping tirelessly along the broad white way. In wickedly toothed maw, nearly each great beast carried the unconsciously lolling body of a girl. Other Big Cats, free-mouthed, loped ahead and along on the outside of the pack as scouts and guards. The word of all this arriving evidently swept through the squalid City with lightning speed; the filthy brute inhabitants were swarming to the highway and forming a howling, shouting, milling corridor. Into the City lined the great racing pack of Big Cats with their lovely prizes. And still more of the blackly banded tawny-orange beasts poured from the entrance slit with unconscious femininity in their mouths.

The girls were of a race never before seen by Toka. But they were exquisite of form, a dark tan of complexion. They were fine of feature, with long brunette, blonde and titian tresses trailing from their loosely bobbing heads. Their varicolored sarongs were now awry, from the trained Big Cats capturing and carrying their wearers here. And evidently those captures had been most adroit; so far as Toka's superb sight could detect, not one of the girls was marred by even a scratch.

"So," narrowly mused Toka, "Mates for the men of Zolanda."

"My Big Cats have begun quite well," glowed Vola.

"And if their warriors follow?"

"Did any of your party detect any Big Cat sign in the valley?"

Toka's silence was agreement.

"YET each day," stated Vola, "scores of my Big Cats hunt the

valley for extra meat and fruit for the Temple."

"Discovery of the canyon could be accidental."

"You think Zolanda's men and my Big Cats could not hold the canyon against any force?"

"And food?"

"The canyon could supply our wants indefinitely."

The huge lined-out pack of Big Cats was streaming through the City now, the brute men's eager lusting held at bay by the malevolently escorting beasts. Toka's restlessly searching thoughts were detoured, his fighter-being tensed, as he saw one hairy brute break wildly for the lovely prize of a passing Big Cat. The degenerate beat his club at the instantly pawing Big Cat, yanked at the unconscious girl's long black hair, tore her ill-secured sarong in vain effort to free her from that wickedly toothed mouth. There was a blasting roar of rage from one of the alertly guarding Big Cats as it came streaking for the scene. The hairy brute man was too beserk with lust to know or care. The guarding Big Cat was a roaring blur to the crazed violator. The beast's great forepaws unsheathed their needle-keen long claws as they flashed. The brute man was slammed clear, was a bleeding and convulsing hairy brown thing soiling the white paving. The Big Cat was instantly on him, its great long yellow foreteeth flashing, coming away streaming red. Its great claws were ripping furiously, scattering crimsonly dripping shreds of hairy flesh and bones and lengths of gore into the ranks of the now silently cowering brute men. Pausing a viciously snarling moment to hatefully eye the hairy citizens, the Big Cat whirled away and resumed his place as running guard. The Big Cats carrying the captive girls had loped

on by without pause, were streaking past the massive colosseum and up for the Temple.

"Pleasant little pets," mused Toka. He wondered if Roya and the others were imprisoned where they could have viewed that very sobering incident. Probably; Vola was adroit enough.

Vola fixed Toka with an implying eye. "It is only what happens to people who are foolish enough to disobey my wishes."

Fine chance of escaping from this place, mentally cursed Toka. Fine chance of ever being found here!

The massive and jeweled doors of the Temple were yawning out to welcome the nearing pack of Big Cats and their unconscious prizes.

Toka casually eyed Vola. "Where is all this supposed to end?"

Vola's deeply gray eyes were amused, but alight with a certainty engendered by her increasing successes. "It is very simple. My Big Cats will capture all the young women and girls of all the other cities in the valley. Those cities shall be unable to repopulate themselves, while Zolanda shall repopulate itself to overflowing, and my Big Cats shall number in the tens of thousands. In one generation, this shall be the most powerful city in all the valley. And Zolanda," fore-tasted Vola, "shall make all the world her slave!"

THE deadly pronouncement ringing through his mind, Toka stood and watched the Big Cats streaming into the Temple. Vola's scheme was like herself: beautifully diabolical, patiently efficient, coldly ruthless. He envisioned his far distant city of Sandcliff—innocent of this black evil that was incubating so virilely in this secret canyon! And no doubt those other cities up-valley were, as implied by the captive girls' intelligent features and grace,

finely civilized, too. Yet how could this Hell-born wickedness be stopped from boiling out over the world!

Toka's anguished thoughts turned back to Roya and the others of the party. It was obvious now why it had been necessary that they be summarily removed from the area of the valley just outside; this pack of Big Cats had been long overdue, would have warned the party, would have betrayed the scheme. And that also meant other Big Cats were on lookout, would give instant warning of any approach—or any attempt to leave.

But why capture the small hunting party alive? Why not simply tell the Big Cats to kill them? Why expend so many Big Cats for an alive-capture? The answer was Gori and his followers. The sight of Roya and Elees had made Gori and his restless brutes patient for another little while. And what else! Were Roya and Elees intended for Gori and Zano? Toka fought his boiling anger from showing.

And what of Rok and Old Ledo and himself? Obviously, Vola wanted to see if she and her priestesses' sterility could be overcome by men from outside Zolanda! Toka mentally smiled grimly. And how could Vola be sure the three men of Sandcliff would be any more cooperative than the girls her Big Cats were bringing in for the brute men? Unless he had badly misjudged their features, those captive girls were too much like Roya and Elees and the women of Sandcliff; they would take Death first. If they could.

But, soberly realized Toka, the vanishing of any city's young women brought Death to all that city! How, then to prevent it all? How in Heaven's name to save Roya and the others!

The one possible weakness in the fiendish plan, at the moment, was its brain herself. But how far, hesitated

Toka, would he have to go with the keenly watching creature? And how much could he dare with those two Big Cats watching before the locked doors there! Yet how else could he do anything soon enough?

Watching the Temple doors pulled to after the last Big Cat and captive girl, assuring his protesting morals and beseeching his pretenses, Toka turned with a hesitantly admiring smile to the self-satisfied and narrowly watching Vola. "I guess you're about the smartest woman in this old world."

That resurrected hope was daring in her eyes again. Her voice reflected her long-denied desires. "Toka admires me only for my intelligence?"

Holding her gaze, Toka softly baited, "That—and other things."

With a swishing of her gossamer gown, the regal Vola languored from the window and reclined on her spacious lounge. As her mouth and eyes quirked at him, Toka lazily followed and sat beside her, then shifted uncomfortably, frowned slightly.

Vola's lips were amused, her luminous eyes dancing. "Why does Toka hesitate?"

HE GLANCED pointedly toward the malevolently watching Big Cats before the doors. "Two is company. Four is liable to be something else."

"I think we may trust my Big Cats."

He dare not be too insistent, yet. "But how far?"

Vola's eyes held his. "To any pleasurable length."

She should know. He had to take the chance. He took her wrist, admired her jeweled bracelets. "Pretty nice."

"The bracelets?" Her cool fingers wound into his lean strong ones.

He danced his eyes to hers. "And their wearer."

Fingers locking into his, she drew him down beside her on the soft lounge. Fingers still locked, she drew his arm over her head and held his hand down on her sheer-clad foreshoulder. The lounge eased them together. She lay close against him. Her face was turned up near to his, her jeweled and scented crown of creamy-palomino hair brushing his cheek and temple. Her slightly parted lips were exhaling warm scented breath to his face. Her body perfuming was crowding into his nostrils.

He met her hopefully smouldering gray eyes. "Comfortable?"

Her low contralto was edged with coming excitement. "Very."

Through the diaphanous sheaths of her silken gown Toka was starkly aware of Vola's smooth long limbs pressing against his bare legs, of her black-briefed hips and scantily banded creamy-skinned torso against his naked side. More shouts from the City far below and another muffled stirring in the Temple announced the coming of a second successful pack of Big Cats. But as did Vola, so Toka let it come.

With mounting eagerness, Vola breathed, "Prince Toka seems to have the rousing touch."

"Nor is my blood running cold," whispered Toka.

Vola was turned close against him, her free fingers playing lazily through his sleek hair. His free hand stole to the sheer-gowned small of her back. She closed her shadowy eyelids, brushed her warm red lips along his cheek. Toka barely played his mouth against her ear. She smiled, approved him through drooping eyelids, wound her arms around his neck, tightened herself to him. He let his arms slip into place about her straining waist and shoulders. Her sheer gown and jeweled scents only lent an exciting silkiness

to the embrace. Her full femininity forced its soft pressures against his lean tan nakedness and set his pulses to speeding despite his resolve. Her lips were searching over his features, hungering for his mouth. Her quickened breathing deepened her pressures against him.

WITH a roguish grin, Toka avoided her mouth, buried his lips in her jeweled braids. Vola throatily laughed her excited pleasure and fought to pursue his mouth. In parry, Toka kissed her ears and hair again. The jeweled clips slipped from her braids. The palomino tresses were cascading their scented lengths about her shoulders. Her royal-blue gown was askew, even its exciting sheerness slipping away arousingly. Vola's passion flamed in her gray eyes. Her carmine lips were frantic, impatient. Her breath came and went deep and fast in her full breast.

Her plea quivered with happy laughter. "Kiss me!"

Toka kissed lightly along the smooth nudity of her shoulders. "What'll you give me?"

"What do you want?" she freely offered.

Impishly avoiding her hungrily eager lips, Toka held his mouth to her ear, "You."

Vola's passionate unrestraint was in her eager whisper. "Well, stop running away!"

"Lends more flavor." Toka barely brushed his lips over her throat with taunting skill, played his mouth against her ear. "Besides, who wants to get caught for nothing?"

Vola's nearness to satisfying her long starvation was whipping her to frantic eagerness. "You can have anything! Kiss me!"

Toka darted his intimately laughing face to the pulsing hollow of her throat.

But though his surface was freely enjoying this, his inner being was frantic with fear. Her gown tangling her, Vola impatiently slipped it away. Her jeweled briefs were becoming too twisted. And Toka was only too aware of her smoothly nude long limbs sliding on his naked ones, of her so scantily clad full torso pressing and slipping on his bareness. His heart hammered more with fear than passion. His breath was quickened more with trepidation than wrestling Vola's straining femininity. Yet her scent crowded his nostrils, crept into his blood and hazed his pure resolve. But out there beyond the windows, and racing across the terrace and into the Temple, was a third great pack of successful Big Cats. And if Roya should be added to their captives—

Toka held fiercely to his determination, played on in this reckless game.

"Tell me what you want!" passionately urged Vola. "Tell me!"

His hands playfully battling Vola's strongly determined ones, Toka ran his lips tauntingly down her smooth shoulder. "You'll be Queen of the world."

"And you'll be my King!" freely offered Vola. "Now kiss me!"

Darting his face barely beyond reach, Toka laughingly eyed Vola. Her features were flushed with enjoyment and further desire. Her gray eyes danced with happy flames of frantic passion. "You'll have me for your King?" doubtfully questioned Toka.

"Or kill myself!" vowed Vola.

TOKA tempered his gaiety with enough graveness to match Vola's intense passion. "You won't have to kill yourself."

Vola's face and eye filled with even more happiness. Her voice was a low hot breath. "Oh, my Toka!" She hugged herself fiercely to him and

mouthed for his lips in a frenzy.

Despite his fearing and protesting morals, Toka knew he had to make it at least appear sincere. He tightened his arms around Vola's naked waist and shoulders, pressed his spread hands to her smooth firm flesh, let her lips find his. They clung with hot hunger as her bodily beauty clung to his with arousing possession. The fire of her passion blazed at Toka's resolves. Her scenting drugged at his senses. Her lips worked against his, fanning stronger the passionate flames blazing at his restraints. He could feel her heart pounding through her breast and against his chest, could feel his own heart hammering in response to this powerful offering. His basic emotions were clamoring for release; his strict morals fought desperately to hold them at bay. Stark panic grew in him.

He wrenched his head, flashed his hands to free Vola's locked arms from him. She fought to retain him, but his strength easily overcame hers. He broke free, sat up, grinning wryly away to cover his bitter disgust with himself. Vola lay relaxed, too disheveled. She was smiling dreamily, flushed with enjoyment. Her gray eyes were alight with discovery and future satisfaction.

Toka tried for the jocular touch. "Woman, don't ever let me hear you say you're a cold cucumber." He wagged his head, rolled his eyes eloquently. He ran his trembling hand to smooth his hair back into place, and whispered, "What a bonfire."

Enjoying the flattery, Vola sat up, adjusted her scant black attire and began rebraiding her palomino hair. "Apparently the coldness of the women of Zolanda is not so much the woman as the right man." She smiled the implication. "So far as we went."

Toka occupied himself by recovering her diaphanous blue gown and placing

its immodesty about her shoulders. "I can't speak for the woman, but this man will have to recuperate before another session."

Vola laughed softly in her throat. Her luminous eyes slyly held his. "It exceeded the intensity of Roya's?"

He'd been waiting for that. He frowned, was forgetful the correct split-instant. "Who?" Then he made remembrance dawn. "Oh." He grinned. "There could be no comparison whatever." That was no lie—only it wasn't in the direction that Vola took. He saw her preen with success.

She mused. "I hope my priestesses find Rok and Old Ledo at least half as effective as my Toka."

BUSY at recovering her jeweled hair clips, Toka covered his anger with a chuckle. "If your priestesses' effectiveness is anything like their Queen's, I only hope Rok and Old Ledo can survive."

Vola was again assembled into her regal neatness of coiffure and costume. Here eyes narrowed with savor. "Yes, my priestesses should compete most interestingly for first chance at Rok and Old Ledo in this night's Festival."

"Festival?" warily puzzled Toka.

"The Luna Festival in the colosseum," elucidated Vola. "It is a custom rooted deep in the emotions of all Zolandians, men and women alike. It is held on the coming of each full moon. As High Priestess, I preside and award the prizes." Her carmine lips quirked. "I think the coming Festival will be the most entertaining ever."

"What's it like?" searched Toka.

"A prize is offered. Anyone desiring to compete for it jumps up and shouts, 'I.' Anyone else may challenge him—or her."

Toka didn't like the tone of all this. "But how do they compete?"

"By combat, the challenger having the choice of weapons."

"Must be bad on the mortality rate," dryly mused Toka.

"Oh, they only use their fists, or wrestle and so on—" smiled Vola, "—so far."

There was something cunning, ominous and cold-blooded in her mien. Toka quested, "The arrangements for awards must require much thought and time?"

"Considerable." Vola glanced through the bars of the casement windows to check the sun. "Much of the morning has flown—but most entertainingly." She turned back to Toka. "My chief priestesses must be waiting most impatiently for me in the conference room. You will excuse me for a little while?"

"A little while," regretted Toka. "But what'll I do?"

"You will be King of Zolanda." Vola smiled. "So why not become familiar with our realm?"

"Good idea," approved Toka. It had been too easy!

"However," guilelessly qualified Vola, "you had best not risk going about alone—yet."

"If I had my battle-ax and knife," casually reflected Toka, "no one would become too eager."

"Weapons might invite trouble," blandly parried Vola. "I will instruct one of my personal Big Cats to be with you at all times."

"Whatever you say, dear," cheerfully agreed Toka over his wary disappointment.

Turning to the pair of Big Cats lying before the great doors, Vola purred to the one that had guarded him thus far. The monstrous feline purred raspily in its collared throat, fastened its malevolent eyes on Toka.

Vola smiled lazily at her captive. "You will be safe now, my Toka."

"I'm sure of that, Vola dear," cordially agreed Toka.

STANDING her full regal femininity against him, laying her smooth arms around his neck, she raised her mouth for a kiss. Haunted by that recent near debacle of emotions, Toka held her lightly and touched his lips briefly to hers.

"In a little while, Toka dearest," she softly and radiantly bid, then stepped her silkily swishing way to the doors. Her Big Cat stood up, opened the doors, then followed her through and pulled them to.

Toka was alone with his frantic urgency and the watching Big Cat assigned to him. Lest it somehow read his thoughts, Toka turned his back on the beast and brooded out the windows.

The run of the realm! Yeah. And if he tried to walk out that slit entrance of the realm, or if he tried to free certain people—that nice little kitty there would be only too happy to dissuade him. I would report every move and action, perhaps every word, to dear Queen Vola.

No, not words; Vola would not have purred to it, but would have spoken. So . . .

Turning, Toka sauntered toward the doors and Big Cat. "Well, pal," he cordially greeted in fearless manner, "come along and we'll have a look around the realm."

CHAPTER VII

AT TOKA'S gesture, his Big Cat, with a watchful yellow eye for him, pressed the red inlays in the ornate blue doors of the lounge room. Toka stepped out. The Big Cat followed, drew the doors to and paced watchfully at Toka's left. Thus accompanied, Toka began searching his way through the maze

of vaulted corridors in the Temple's ground level. Not knowing what instructions the beast may have received from Vola, it watching his every move even though it obeyed his gestures to the doors, Toka knew he dare not risk going directly to the cells of Roya and the others. He had best learn the geography of the realm first.

Leaving the Temple by the great jeweled front doors, Toka began strolling down the broad white way. A quick whistle shrilled through the bird songs. Toka glanced up the towering Temple's narrowing walls. Four pairs of arms were waving frantically from a quartet of the small grilled windows on the twelfth floor, the level on which he had been imprisoned. Toka easily made out the strained faces of Roya and Elees, of Rok and Old Ledo, behind the thick blue bars. Other frightened faces of fine feminine beauty stared down at him from hundreds of the other small blue windows checkering the great Temple. But only his party's were in the twelfth's windows. Toka fought himself from showing his true concern. With the Big Cat watching him—and no one knew who else—he smiled cheerfully, waved casually and sauntered on down the highway. But he was dogged by the thought of how sick Roya and the others must be!

Then Toka's superkeen sight saw the swaggering Zano, down in the City. The expression on that hairy face was just a bit too carefree to be real. The shaggy brute's manner, as he approached one of the houses, was a trifle too absent to be unintended. Or so it seemed to Toka. Just what were Zano and Gori up to anyway?

CHAPTER VIII

COMING to the littered foreyard of a dirty hovel that had once been a

beautifully architected one of the cubiform dwellings on the east outskirts, Zano turned up the flagstoned walk. His swagger hesitated a split instant as his suddenly narrowed eyes again saw the hairy brown bulk of the familiar One Foot, sprawled in slack-jawed sleep on the steps, shaggy head resting near the closed door—as usual. Zano shrugged slightly, swaggered on up the steps. He didn't bother knocking, but commandingly swung the unlocked blue panel into the dimness and stinking squalor. He swaggered in, pushed the door shut and set the inlay. He smirked as the pair of hairy brutes in the corner hurriedly rose in deference to a superior. One hulking specimen was marked by the ugly orifice left behind by a lost nose, the other by two pairs of rotten fangs that protruded up and down outside his loose lips. Like all, both had the shag-shadowed hot green eyes with red-veined balls.

"Welcome, good Zano," guttured the pair.

"Rest on, Huk and Kal," generously granted Zano. He slouched down on a nearby heap of filth that served as bed and chair, as table and store of rotten food scraps.

The noseless Huk and fanged Kal slouched back onto their heap of filth and waited, eyes smouldering with lecherous hopes.

Zano studied them a moment. His low rasp was condescending. "Events are progressing well?"

"Very well," hoarsely said Huk.

"Far more than half are now to be depended upon," growled Kal.

"And when the remaining ones behold the present High Priestess deposed—" began Huk.

"—and behold their present leader descend into what appears to be glorious Death during the coming Festival —" added Kal.

"—they, too, will flock solidly to our Zano," summed up Huk.

Zano's greedy eyes flamed with success, with nearing triumph. "These services of Huk and Kal shall not be forgotten," he glibly promised.

The horrible pair thickly chuckled their pleasure. Their eyes burned with fleshly savor. Then, abruptly, they frowned.

Zano's shrewd eyes instantly narrowed. "What clouds your visions of pleasure?"

"Gori," growled Kal.

"So?" urged Zano.

"He," hesitated Huk, "yet suspects nothing?"

Zano smirked confidently for his trepidant pair. "Gori is a giant of body, but an infant of intelligence."

His qualmish pair relaxed.

Zano's cunning eyes knew them too well. "Let my Huk and Kal rest easy and continue their good work."

"We take good Zano's word," humbly rasped Huk.

"And trust good Zano himself takes care in the work," supplicatingly growled Kal.

Zano's ego became inflated by his subjects' deferential manner. "All is well. There is no more news?"

His shaggy pair wagged their heads, then rose in token of respect as Zano stood up to leave.

CHAPTER IX

TOKA leisurely meandered past the colosseum, the huge white and blue structure massive but graceful on his left. Clearing it, his gaze centered again into the City below, and fell upon the decayed house that Zano was now leaving. And again Toka had something to ponder.

As Huk and Kal closed and locked their door, and as Zano swaggered from

sight, and interested watcher would have seen the indolent One Foot fluster his lids from darting green eyes, drowsily stretch his shaggy hulk in good appearance and yawn his snag-toothed mouth to the sky for final effect. One Foot indolently scratched at his flea and lice colonies, lazily stood up. He was drop-sided as he rested on one good foot and on one ankle that was sloppily capped with scraps of animal hide. Rocking sideways and back, One Foot hobbled on an indifferently scavenging way toward the center of the City. And seemingly without design, he was scrounging in a debris-strewn alley there.

One Foot's searching eyes found the area to himself. He rocked over to the rear door of a decadent residence, listened carefully before gently rapping his hairy knuckles to the blue panel. A moment, and the door swung in, to reveal a shaggy giant standing within.

"Enter, good friend," softly growled Gori.

Silently hobbling into the stinking gloom, One Foot slouched down on a bed of filth. Locking the door, Gori lowered himself to the other bed. One Foot found the salivous chaw of rotten meat, plopped it into his mouth and began cuddling.

There was a good tinge of anxiety in Gori's green eyes and guttural urging. "There is much news?"

"Much," impartially grunted One Foot. "Zano visits again with his fools."

"And my good ears were only sleeping on their doorstep?" flattered Gori.

"So their talk would believe." One Foot fixed Gori with a stolid stare. "Huk and Kal assure Zano far more than half are now sure."

Gori scowled his concern. Too late had One Foot first let out that his King's women-starved following was being wooed away by Zano. With his

CHAPTER X

awful strength, Gori could easily have broken the treacherous Zano into so many pieces. But instead, Gori, greedy for full power, had matched wits with Zano, using the sly Zano against the adroit Vola—while he schemed against both. But it all seemed to lead only deeper and deeper into a morass of bewilderments for Gori's simple mind. He growled with synthetic self-assurance. "Yet the other near half are still mine."

One Foot shifted his cud, looked away. "Huk and Kal assure Zano the remaining ones will flock to him when Queen Vola and King Gori are no more."

Gori's narrowed eyes smouldered. His heavy lips twitched in his facial shag. "And when is this to be?"

"During the coming Festival."

In a silence broken only by One Foot's wetly noisy cudding, Gori considered long, lumbering moments, then fixed his too indifferent informer with a steady stare. "One Foot would like the dark-haired one from far down valley?"

One Foot's bloodshot green eyes now kindled. His guttural was now thick with base greed. "King Gori is generous."

One Foot's weakness now his, Gori rose. "And One Foot serves well—he may also keep that chaw of meat."

One Foot rose to drop-sided deformity. His rotten snaggles of teeth grinned. "Truly, King Gori is generous."

Gori opened the rear door, peered keenly but casually out, drew back, motioned One Foot out. Rocking sideways and back, the hairy informer departed on his innocently scavenging way. Gori closed the door, listened intently against it for several long moments, then reopened it, peered casually out, stepped silently out and pulled the door softly to.

TOKA wandered down into the City. The filthy, hairy, armed and powerful brute men eyed him hatefully, but gave a safe berth to him and his striding Big Cat. Toka sauntered through the City and for the entrance slit. If the Big Cat suspected anything, it gave no sign. It merely paced silently along a length behind him, the hot sunlight glistening on its healthily sleek coat of blackly banded tawny-orange.

From a distance, the slit appeared impassibly choked with lush green jungle. But as Toka neared it, the enigma clarified. Taking over where the highway ended, the generous brook bored through the slit's green tangle, forming a passage that was ample but sharply twisting as it conformed to the deep slit's sharp zigzags. These sharp breaks blocked any detection from the valley beyond, and the brook immediately washed away any tracks left in its sandy bed.

The Big Cat now narrowly eyeing him, Toka swung his superkeen gaze back around the canyon walls. There was no other sign of an exit. Every lofty wall was sheer, unscalably smooth in the clearly revealing sunlight. Escape would have to be through this slit, and past the lookout Big Cats that were evidently somewhere beyond.

Turning back to the green and watery passage, Toka idled down the decline of the highway, where it ended in the sharp curve of the tumbling brook. As he expected, the Big Cat growled raspily in its collared throat as it followed him closely.

Toka paused, cast the half-crouching beast a surfacely humorous glance. "And if I go any farther?"

He idled another half step down toward the water. Snarling softly and

steadily, the Big Cat crouched lower. Its great tawny-orange body taut. Its great down-curving foreteeth glistened their yellow wickedness. Its black lips were drawn from its clean white sharpnesses of smaller teeth. Its yellow eyes blazed green fires of final warning.

Toka poised ready, jocular over his damnable helplessness. "But you wouldn't rip me apart, would you? Queen Vola wouldn't like that, would she?" He sardonically answered, "No, you'd only bat me silly and pack me back to the nice big jail."

The Big Cat gave not the slightest sign of understanding or caring; it had received orders, and that was that. Casting a keen glance into the watery passage, unable to detect anything beyond the first sharp bend, Toka sauntered back to the highway's level. Still watching closely, the Big Cat relaxed, stood up, stretched lazily and followed Toka back along the white way.

Toka's gaze lanced up to the Temple, the twelfth floor; Roya, Rok, Elees and Old Eedo would not have missed the significance of all this.

Then Toka's ever-searching gaze was caught by another interesting bit of action that emphasized the mysterious plotting and counter-plotting in this situation. But as before, he could see only the beginning.

CHAPTER XI

KEEPING the hobbling hulk of the scavenging One Foot barely in view, Gori, with seemingly casual strolling, followed to the east outskirts of the rubbled City. He watched One Foot hobble into the dense woods spreading up toward the Temple gardens. Slipping into the nearby mouth of a bushy gully for concealment, Gori scurried on into the darkly gloomy forest. With animal cunning and

stealthy swiftness, he shadowed silently through the dark and dense greenery, and was on One Foot's trail.

Over next to the east wall of the canyon and up the steep slopes toward the gardens One Foot led the smouldering-eyed Gori. The woods were high enough and interlaced so thickly overhead that no one watching from the towering Temple could have detected the drama here. And around through the wild tangles bordering the eastmost end of the well-kept gardens and abutting the canyon wall Gori shadowed One Foot. Around against the north wall and toward the rear of the Temple they skulked. Slipping through nearly to the edge of a thick tangle before a short stretch of shrub-enclosed lawn at the blank and windowless back of the Temple, One Foot crouched low. His narrowed green eyes gleamed across the sunny green lawn, then darted around himself, peered back into the darkly gloomy way he had so carefully come.

Sweeping past the heavy black-green tangle wherein the giant Gori had belied down to watching silence, One Foot's nervous gaze returned, paused on the concealment. Gori lay taut, ceased his breath, narrowed his blood-shot green eyes to merest slits to minimize their blazing fires betraying him. One Foot's jumpy gaze darted on back to the Temple's blank rear.

Slowly, silently, narrowed eyes blazing hotly, Gori began snaking forward through the shadowy vegetation and over the cushioning carpet of damp humus, until, still a part of the thick dark tangle, he was less than two paces from his tensely crouched quarry.

Evidently timing the sun, One Foot glanced again to the sky, which was near blotted out by the heavily interlaced vegetation of the overhead. He frowned, muttered in his breath, stirred



restlessly.

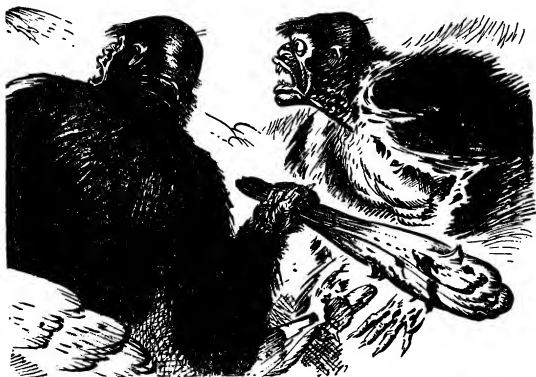
A door-sized segment of the Temple's blank white wall suddenly opened in, and One Foot's attention tensed on the dark cavity. Silently as a shadow, slower than an eye would note, Gori stood up, was a part of the dark tangle, was scarce a pace directly behind One Foot. As One Foot watched the secret door and as Gori watched both, a Big Cat, wearing a brilliantly gemmed collar, strode its tawny-orange length out. It was followed by the tall blue-gowned regality of Vola.

As her malevolently eyeing Big Cat paused before her, Vola stood and drilled her eyes across the enclosed lawn and along the edge of the wild tangle. Her imperial gray eyes paused nowhere in their narrow searching, nor did her eyeing Big Cat's yellow ones. Obviously neither creature detected the watchers in the brush. Checking the

sun, Vola cupped her hands to mouth. The low cooing of a dove threaded through the ceaseless symphonies of the garden's birds. Vola dropped her hands from her mouth, waited. Grinning crookedly with the satisfaction he enjoyed from having the royally aloof Vola await his leisure, the crouched One Foot cupped his shaggy hands to hairy mouth, took a breath.

THE hot-eyed and evilly grinning Gori's long hairy arms reached down through the gloom. Clamping around One Foot's shaggy throat, the great snag-nailed hairy fingers vised in with such power and speed that Gori's huge muscles knotted under their shaggy coat, and One Foot instantly sagged silent, lax. Holding his pose with One Foot, Gori waited, eyes narrowed on Vola and her Big Cat.

The impatiently frowning Vola again



cupped her hands to mouth, and again the dove call threaded through the bird symphony. Eyelids closed to merest slits, the giant Gori waited motionlessly. Gray eyes keen, Vola searched the edge of the tangle. Gori's huge hairy barrel of chest ceased its breathing. Vola shrugged, purred to her Big Cat and accompanied it back through the secret door.

Still clutching One Foot by the neck, Gori straightened up. With effortless ease he held the limp hulk of One Foot at arm's length, sneered silently into the gaping-mouthed, bulging-eyed and unseeing shaggy face. Flipping One Foot's lifeless bulk and catching it by the one good ankle, Gori hoisted it against his great back and shadowed away into the woods, the deathly staring head dangling loosely from its crushed neck.

Shadowing down the slopes from the Temple gardens, Gori came to a decayed small farm, made certain its vegetation-tangled hut was deserted. Entering, finding a large animal-hide bag in the debris, he dumped the loose hulk of One Foot into it, gathered the bag mouth together. Hoisting the load to his back, he strolled leisurely, boldly and blandly toward the fringes of the degenerate City.

His bloodshot green eyes were pleased. His heavy lips quirked with coming savor. This was more like it: Definite action—plus witty maneuverings.

CHAPTER XII

PROTECTED from the armed brutes, as well as his own curiosity, Toka scouted among the decayed farmlands and orchards, then searched through the streets of the City in seemingly carefree inspection. He cataloged the position of Gori's decadent but

more ornate residence, and speculated on the other more squalid places. He estimated the number of hairy brutes at some three thousand, and felt his constant anger and concern churn even more violently at the excited anticipation of the filthy brutes for the captive girls in the Temple.

Then Toka speculated on the sudden reappearance of Gori from the woods. Where was the hairy giant taking that bag, a bag huge enough to hold a man? He was heading for the hovels on the outskirts.

But the morning and half the afternoon gone, the surrounding farmlands and City cataloged for future need, Toka headed for the Temple—and saw another item of interest in the deserted gardens up there.

CHAPTER XIII

IT WAS the hot hour midway between the sun's zenith and setting. And a half-eager, half-fearful Lora strolled alone toward the lower east corner of the Temple gardens. She passed through the lacily shadowy corridor of trees. And the confidently smirking Zano was beside the spring, was lounging on his club. Lora's step hesitated, but was drawn on.

Checking the sun, Zano rasped softly, "Lady Lora is on time."

Lora's eyes tried to be cold, her manner superior. She couldn't quite make it. "What does Zano want this time?"

Zano chuckled at her tone of scorn. "How are the captives?"

"Safe."

"And the Prince Toka?"

Lora's anger smoldered in her eye, darkened her regal features, edged her voice. "Queen Vola entertained him in her lounge room—as an experiment. Now he has the freedom of the realm—in the company of a Big Cat."

"Ah!" slyly enjoyed Zano. "She finds his charms effective—but not enough so to give him freedom from the canyon, yet."

Lora considered Zano with a narrow glance. The seeds of the morning had germinated well in her.

Zano knowingly read her desires. "Queen Lora would do differently."

Lora glanced away, obviously savoring that juicy appetizer of "Queen" Lora. Hope and fear, desire and wishing to dare, battled through her. "Queen Vola is ever guarded by at least one Big Cat," she softly observed. "And what of the thousands of others of the beasts, when they are suddenly deprived of her guidance?" She shrugged her regal shoulders eloquently, hopelessly.

"Without Queen Vola, will the Big Cats know what to do? Who will tell them?" Zano grinned loosely. "The priestesses who now work with them will be the ones."

Lora considered this chancy logic.

The cunning-eyed Zano saw her hope flicker higher. "And as for Vola herself," he softly fed, "a knife, properly driven by—say a trusted priestess . . ."

Lora's breath quickened and deepened with the thoughts given her. Her narrowed eyes became bright. Yet, fear still held her from accepting. "The guarding Big Cats might instantly destroy the knife wielder."

Zano smirked shrewdly. "An unprotected white throat, with a keen blade driven truly through it, has no voice to command anything."

The hope flamed brighter in Lora's eyes.

Zano shrewdly estimated the fear that yet restrained her. "Vola has arranged for the Festival?"

"Fully."

"It will be more exciting than usual?"

"For some." Lora obviously looked

ahead and saw it, hated what she saw. "Vola takes Toka for herself—while all the rest of us compete for the other two, to share among us!"

"The competitions," mused Zano, as if considering for the first time. "Perhaps that is the answer!"

Lora's narrowed eyes blazed with skepticism.

"The colosseum in one continuous uproar," pointedly reminisced Zano, "which always makes the Big Cats nervous, distracts men—as well as their mistress' wariness."

The blaze in Lora's eyes leaped. Her breath deepened. Her features came alight. Then suspicion returned. "But just why does Zano take such pains to accomplish this for me?"

Zano's lips quirked. He shrugged his shaggy shoulders. "Because Zano is sure Queen Lora will reward him." "With what?"

Zano's eyes blazed his lust at the very thought. His guttural rasped thickly with it. "The Princess Roya."

Lora smiled amusedly. "Does not King Gori lust for that one?"

"Queen Lora thinks Zano has not thought?" He chuckled in his throat. His eyes glittered into the future. "Many shall not survive this Festival—perhaps not even King Gori." He grinned confidently, saw the blaze in Lora's eyes burn high, saw her features smile coldly as she conquered her last fear.

Her voice was low and cool. "Queen Lora shall keep close to Vola—very close."

Zano's cunning eyes danced. His loose mouth grinned from his dirty teeth. "And Zano shall see to Gori's comfort also."

The plotters' eyes met, understood.

"King Zano," congratulated Lora.

"And Queen Lora," chuckled Zano.

"Until the Festival," softly bid Lora.

Trying to keep her secret from her face and eyes, she turned back toward the Temple.

Watching her tall and regal and gossamer-gowned figure disappear into the lacy corridor through the copse, Zano turned and slipped into the woods spreading down the steep slopes. His shagged features were alight with successful cunning, his bloodshot green eyes dancing with evil amusement.

CHAPTER XIV

REENTERING the Temple, and uncomfortable under the too frankly admiring eyes of the bevy of voluptuous priestesses, Toka and his Big Cat took a door that led down into the Temple's depths. As in those of the main floor and tower, the wide low corridors of these levels were dimly illumined only by the white stone of wall and ceiling. Toka found and inspected the Big Cats' ornate dens, where the tractable monsters were fed, counter-scented and curried and brushed by the priestesses—attentions which seemed to make the Big Cats regard the women with favor. Toka also discovered and stored great storerooms of foods and clothing. But what he wanted most to discover, he did not find: his party's weapons. Still in these depths, he came at last to a huge black door, which his Big Cat insolently refused to open. And as he himself stepped watchfully forward toward the red inlay in the casing, his beast growled sharply.

Toka glanced at his Big Cat, then addressed a passing priestess. "What is beyond this door?"

Her hunger for his sex was an embarrassing thing to see. "It leads to the Wild One."

Toka cordially eyed the woman for effect. "The Wild One?"

Not even her gnawing hunger nor her elation at being close to and conversing with him could overcome her fear of retribution. "It is not for one such as I to reveal that which Queen Vola obviously sees fit not to reveal." Bowing her proud head of palomino hair, the priestess hurried from the temptation of him.

With a thoughtful look after her, and with a jocular glance for his ready Big Cat, Toka shrugged, retraced his way for the Temple's main floor. Still he did not encounter Vola. But he had no regrets there. And at last he was going to his real goal; he began searching his way into the upper reaches of the Temple. The gratings at the ends of each corridor of cells wherein the thousands of captive girls were prisoner were his to enter. As an experiment, he took over the chore of grating opening; the Big Cat deigned indifference, only watched closely for any untoward action. And Toka, using the southwest corner's stair system, was on his way. Strangely, or perhaps because the prisoners were believed secure enough, Toka encountered no other Big Cat or any priestesses on his upward way.

On the twelfth's landing, as he had on the preceding others, he opened the door set in the outer corner and inspected the small storeroom beyond. But this time his heart leaped as he saw his and his party's weapons and gear, all lying so unguarded in the white and blue windowless dimness. But even before he could move to step in, his too-ready Big Cat snarled its low hateful warning on his very neck.

Toka covered his angry frustration with a quipping good humor. "No touchie, eh?"

Ready for further split-instant action, the malevolently glaring Big Cat snarled in its collared throat.

"Okay, pal," jovially agreed Toka. He shut the storeroom's door casually, made sure it was not locked.

With surface indifference, he was into the vital front corridor. Apparently only four of the cells were occupied; all the other doors were still opened back against the corridor walls. Again Toka only absently noted how clearly even his softly sandaled footsteps carried in this corridor. But, as he proved, one could tiptoe without noise. He went straight to the opposite end, checking the absence of any spies. A moment of strange unease touched him. He stood still listening, the Big Cat intently watching him. There was nothing to detect. And all those empty cells were empty. Impatience spurring him, he started back up the corridor. The Big Cat followed, to Roya's closed cell.

NERVES taut for the warning snarl, Toka ignored the red inlay for the peephole shutter and casually reached for the latch inlay. The Big Cat gave no sign, and Toka leisurely pulled the heavy door wide, and embarked on his difficult act.

As the glad-faced blonde Roya rushed her goldenly briefed preciousness toward him, Toka quipped, "Enjoying your stay?" He saw his voice, his manner, was correctly one of amused indifference and callous disregard; the lovely Roya stopped short, frowned stupidly at him.

The Big Cat intently watching every action of them both, Toka acted on in the mood. "Please keep pretending that way, Roya, so we can fool my pal."

Toka's heart overflowed with admiration; Roya never so much as let gladness return to her eyes. Her voice and her expressions were jealous. "You have found the way?"

Toka smiled indifferently. "Rok will come."

Roya played her part well. She turned away in distaste. "And you?"

Toka shrugged carelessly. "I'll follow."

Roya's lovely creamy-tan body was rejecting him as she sauntered to her cell window. Her voice was despising. "Is there no other way?"

Toka chuckled indifferent amusement. "None."

Roya stood looking out her tiny window. She was straight and obviously indifferent to him. When would he see her again! His arms hungered to possess her! But watched intently by the Big Cat, Toka swung the heavy cell door shut, put his body naturally between the Big Cat and the latch as he gestured at the mechanism. He clicked his fingernail softly on it, did not lock it. Toka was desperately tight under his carefree mien as he turned away; but the Big Cat followed him as usual.

Toka made like entrance at Rok's cell, slouched in the doorway and laughed mockingly as his loyal friend strode eagerly toward him. Rok stopped abruptly, scowled suspiciously.

"Keep that up," smirked Toka, "and we'll fool them all yet."

Rok was as good as Roya. "So," he despised, "it's all set?"

"Weapons in unlocked storeroom on this southwest landing," indifferently instructed Toka.

"That's fine," sarcastically replied Rok. "And the cell doors?"

Toka mocked amusedly. "Try yours after I leave."

"When?" searched Rok with derision. "And where?"

"Soon as our good friends are in an uproar," derided Toka, "skirt the City east and down the brook through the slit."

In anger, Rok turned on his heel, stalked toward the cell window, "And you?"

"I'll follow later," chuckled Toka in careless amusement.

"You lead," despised Rok. "I'll follow later."

"I know the Queen better," mocked Toka. "You lead."

Rok stood straight and certainly angry. He turned. His features, his voice, were full of hate and disgust. "Get out!"

TOKA shrugged indifferently. "And good luck." He stepped out as his best friend and Roya's brother turned back to the window. Again taut of nerve as the Big Cat ever eyed him, Toka swung the heavy cell door to, and repeated his empty ritual with the latching mechanism. But again the Big Cat followed him as usual, on down the long echoing corridor of open doors of empty cells, toward the heavy blue grating closing the end.

How to handle Vola? mused Toka. Simple. Shake this Big Cat, get Vola alone, at least with not more than one of these pets. Then woo the sex-starved witch into another one of those passionate and reckless moods, and brain her with one of those stone canelabras, with anything—and worry about any Big Cat after that. Without the only one who could direct them, the Big Cats should not be too difficult. And with weapons, and with all the plotting and counter-plotting going on, there should be plenty of breaks, once things began popping.

But the thousands of innocent girl captives in the Temple here—and Gori and his lusting brutes running amok among them! It was a thought that Toka found sickening, that clamored at his chivalry and moral senses. But the vision of Roya as plaything for

those filthy brutes slashed back. No! fiercely determined Toka with selfish justification; it was everyone for themselves! Besides, if those girls' warriors were determined and intelligent enough, they should be on their way here now!

Yet, that disconcerting little thought crept in: Vola's Big Cats were trained to leave no spoor for even the finest tracker to unravel.

Toka was at the end grating now, was pressing the latch release. But the mechanism moved too freely, was useless. A small chill touched Toka's heart. He pushed on the grating. It was locked from the other side, and his arm could not reach his fingers to the outer latch release. He heard light-sandaled footsteps, accompanied by softly padding animal ones, coming down the blue stone stairway beyond the landing. He covered his trepidation with a casual manner, and saw Vola's sheer-gowned long legs step into view on the stairway and grow up to her full-curving regality. Her malevolently watching Big Cat followed. Vola's face was cold, mocking. Her gray eyes were hot, bitter.

The chill at Toka deepened, but he smiled fondly. "I've been wondering where my Vola was."

"No doubt." Vola's chill throatiness was sarcastic as she stood before him with imperial grace.

The witch knew or suspected something! Toka frowned innocently. "Something seems to have happened to this grating's lock." He fiddled at his side of it.

Vola's eyes hated him. Her voice mocked him. "Many things have happened." Her lips quirked, and she quoted, "'Enjoying your stay?' 'Please keep pretending that way, Roya, so we can fool my pal.' 'You have found the way?' 'Rok will come.'"

It was his seemingly adroit conver-

sation of but a moment ago with Royal! Never did he feel so nakedly helpless. He was completely unarmed, a ready Big Cat at his back, a locked jail grating before him, and beyond it the intensely hating Vola and another ready Big Cat. He fought to keep his innocently puzzled manner over his stark fear. "I don't understand."

"You will," promised Vola with low icy hate. Her carmen mouth quirked again as she quoted. "'Keep that up and we'll fool them all yet.' 'So, it's all set?' 'Weapons in unlocked storeroom on this southwest landing.' 'That's fine. And the cell door?' 'Try yours after I leave.'—"

IT WAS his recent exchange with Rok! Toka turned his head from the imitatively quoting Vola as he heard the heavy grating back at the opposite end of the echoing corridor open. Regal features perceptively upset and too pale, Lady Lora was stepping in and nervously closing the grating, was too tautly walking down the corridor toward him and testing each closed door's latch, securing the two he had left unlatched.

Toka heard Vola end quoting his exchange with Rok. "—'I know the Queen better. You lead.' 'Get out!' 'And good luck.'"

Defeat galling him, Toka made himself amusedly consider Vola. "I still do not understand." He felt like a parrot.

"I was merely out of sight on the landing here," mocked Vola. "Lady Lora was in the other corridor. At my gesture she tiptoed on around the square and entered from the other end. When you started this way, I merely stole again up a turn of stair, turned around and came back down, to add to your confusion. Yes," she bitterly reflected, "it was a good trap. The cor-

ridor transmits quite well, and I have good ears. And these gratings have secret locks—unknown to visitors."

Toka grinned cheerfully over his angry frustration. "Admirable precautions, Vola darling. But in this instance, unwarranted."

Her hot gray eyes seemed to see into his jumbled thoughts and despise them.

Toka heard Lora come to a nervously rustling idle behind him and his Big Cat. He shrugged philosophically for Vola, and tried, "surely you also heard me tell them I was staying."

Vola's eyes narrowed more. Her lips twitched. "Lady Lora."

"Yes, Queen Vola?"

Was that fear tingeing Lora's respectful reply?

"Escort Prince Toka to his cell."

Toka heard Lora obediently turn and lead back up the corridor. He considered the unrelenting Vola a moment, smiled wryly, shrugged resignedly and quietly followed the tall, graceful and upset Lora. His Big Cat supplely trailed him. At his cell, beyond Royal's, the pale-featured Lora held the heavy door open. Toka paused to cast a glance down corridor to Vola, still narrow-eyed, bitter and implacable beyond the heavy grating there. Waving easily to her, Toka stepped into his cell and considered Lora's fear-touched face as she began swinging the heavy door to. Just before the panel snugged to, she gave him one expressionless stare.

Toka was at his cell door. His super-keen hearing detected Lora and his Big Cat going down the corridor, passing through the now unlocked grating and wordlessly joining Vola and her Big Cat and fading beyond further hearing.

CHAPTER XV

ONE of the fancily-collared Big Cats leading the way and opening the

doors, the other Big Cat bringing up the rear and closing the doors, Vola led Lora into the luxurious lounge room. At Vola's purred command, the Big Cats lay down before the closed doors. Lora stood respectfully as her jeweled mistress reclined on the lounge near the open window.

Narrowed eyes glittering on the uneasy Lora, Vola's features were set in cold and ruthless lines. Her contralto was low and insinuating. "Why is Lady Lora so nervous?"

Lora swung her glance out the window overlooking the terrace. The knuckles of her intertwined fingers whitened with tension. Her smile twitched. "Nearly all the priestesses are similarly affected, Queen Vola."

"So?"

Lora tried for eager anticipation. "It must be our emotions—resurrecting themselves at sight of the Sandcliff men!"

"Possibly."

"And the excitement of the nearing Festival," too quickly added Lora.

Vola's narrowed eyes shrewdly considered her Lady. "Which one of the Sandcliff men does Lady Lora's emotions find most stimulating?"

Lora brightened too much, sighed too rapturously and rolled her eyes too dreamily. "Rok. What a creature!"

Vola's smile was deceptively soft, her voice was misleadingly guileless. "Then Lady Lora shall feel no concern should Prince Toka ever be pitted against the Wild One of Zolanda."

Lora's breath caught. Her features drained. Her fingers clenched tighter. Her tall body quivered. Her eyes widened with true fear, stared with disbelief.

Vola's lips quirked. "Why is Lady Lora so concerned?"

Lora reached blindly for the back of a nearby chair, clutched it tightly

as she fought to cover her revealed feelings. Her voice was flustered. "I'm sure the other priestesses would react likewise, Queen Vola—because Prince Toka so closely resembles the handsome Rok and Old Ledo."

"Lady Lora believes that is the only reason?" slyly tested Vola.

"I can think of no other," assured Lora in swift hope.

Vola laughed silently as she shrewdly and knowingly held Lora's betrayingly stark eyes. Panic was rising through Lora: her eyes shifted; her tongue touched her lips; her pale skin glistened with nervous perspiration. Vola gazed and enjoyed the sight.

A respectful knock softly drummed on the doors. The pair of Big Cats rose and stood ready. Lady Lora's features and body relaxed, grateful for any reprieve.

Vola frowned at the interruption. She purred to her Big Cats, and one opened the doors. A hairy brute an impatient pace behind her, a priestess respectfully, but with distaste, announced, "King Gori's Zano insists he has a matter of vital import for Queen Vola."

Vola's voice was royally cold. "Let Zano enter."

The priestess stood aside. The Big Cats closed the doors and stood hatefully ready after Zano entered. As the filthy brute sauntered forward, his nervousness seemed not all from awareness of the Big Cats' yellow eyes blazing on him. His bloodshot green eyes darted to Lora. His nod seemed short, his loose smirk too twitchy.

Vola was disconcertingly lazy. "What brings Zano here?"

ZANO seemed not quite bland in his facial shag. His guttural seemed not quite factual. "There has been a murder in Zolanda."

Vola's narrowed eyes read Zano's

too jumpy ones. Her cool voice was only mildly interested. "Murder?"

"One Foot," eagerly insinuated Zano. "In the innocent house of Huk and Kal was he found."

Vola was yet surfacely indifferent. "Why should anyone murder One Foot and leave his body in innocent men's abodes?"

"That," softly agreed Zano, "is the enigma."

"But why does Zano come to Queen Vola with this?" she mocked. "Is not King Gori the one to see?"

Zano's shaggy features twitched as he implied, "It was the manner of One Foot's demise that should be of interest to Queen Vola."

Vola raised a slender eyebrow. "So?"

"Strangled," rasped Zano. His cunning eyes seemed betrayers of his fear. "His neck crushed by powerful hands."

Vola narrowly considered the hopefully smiling Zano, then she, too, smiled, but shrewdly. "Not every man of Zolanda possesses that strength."

"Only very few, Queen Vola," eagerly understood Zano.

"Very few," softly affirmed Vola. As the self-satisfied Zano and the rigidly impassive Lora watched her, Vola reflected thoughtfully. "But One Foot's murder is of no importance now. It may be investigated deeper after the Festival, however," she smilingly insinuated, "should the entire matter not have resolved itself by then."

Good disappointment and unease moved Zano's shifting eyes. His loose lips twitched a good nervous smirk. "Zano abides by Queen Vola's wise decision."

Vola was amused. "Lady Lora will see Zano out."

As Lora obediently led the way, the Big Cats opened the doors. Warily watching the departers into the great corridor beyond, the beasts closed the

doors and lay down before them. Vola sneered for the departed ones. But swiftly shuttering all the windows and darkening the room, she dropped herself on the lounge and let the bitter hot tears come. The Big Cats quietly rose and went to her, their yellow eyes tender and worried, their black lips nuzzling comfortingly over her as they whined plaintively. Vola only lay prone, her long and imperially beautiful body racking with a betrayed woman's damnable knowledge.

CHAPTER XVI

ALONE in a length of deserted corridor beyond Vola's lounge room, Lora whirled on the no longer so fearful Zano. Lora's low voice was frantic. "She knows everything! She'll kill us too! It's written all over her! We've got to get away!"

"Cease that fool's tongue!" Zano's consummately cunning eyes mocked her as he toyed his knife and club. "Lora can no more get away now than can Zano."

"But what can we do!"

Lora's royal superiority was lost; Zano knew it. "Continue, of course."

"But alone!" feared Lora.

"Fool!" despised Zano. "We are not alone. Over half the men of Zolanda await my signal, and the remaining ones also join us."

Lora snatched at the hope. "But how!"

"Queen Lora has only to seize her opportunity during the Festival." Zano smirked confidently. "The others of us will complete the program."

Her regal self-control somewhat regained, Lora led on toward the great outer doors. "But why did you come and tell Vola of Gori murdering One Foot?"

Zano chuckled gutturally. "One Foot spied for her on Gori and me."

Lora shocked to a stop. "Then she does know all!"

"But since I came to her and reported," unperturbedly went on Zano, "she will think I do not know she knows, and she will also wonder how much Gori learned before choking One Foot." Zano chuckled his cunning. "Vola's plans, like those of others, shall now have to be quickly remade in uncertainty." His eyes tested the staring Lora's. "But Zano and his men depend on Queen Lora to be quite certain."

Confidence much restored, Lora was icy cold now with determination. "Queen Lora shall not fail." She closed the great outer doors on the filthy Zano's approving smirking.

CHAPTER XVII

ZANO paused a suddenly thoughtful moment. Seeing the terrace and nearby garden areas deserted, he stepped to the shuttered windows of Vola's lounge room, listened intently. His cunning, lusty eyes came alight. Back at the ornate Temple doors, he lounged against them, his hair-covered ear to the joined edges. A moment, and he straightened up, pressed the inlay, drew one door enough to peer in. The length of vaulted corridor was now deserted. Zano was in, the huge door pulled to, was swaggering boldly down corridor, his hairy bare feet scarcely whispering. He entered a branching corridor, and was on the stairway winding up inside the front west corner of the towering structure.

On the twelfth floor, without encountering priestesses or Big Cats, Zano was softly into the corridor of empty cells fronting south. Feet silent, he hurried straight to the opposite end, found that landing and section of stairway empty, that grating also unlocked,

and started back. Mouth twitching lustfully, huge hairy hands working, eyes blazing lecherously, he crept with animal silence to the door of the first closed cell. Pressing his nose to joining of door edge and casing, he sniffed softly, but stole on to the second and third doors. Scenting at the fourth, he rose, to slowly and carefully release and ease the peephole shutter aside.

The lust in his eyes blazed higher. His loose lips slobbered eagerly. His guttural was low in his shaggy throat. "Fair Roya."

Roya whirled from the window, where, after hearing the obvious defeat of Toka's plan for escape, she had been bitterly brooding. The lovely blonde girl cringed with distaste and trepidation for the shaggy ugliness at the peephole. Her voice was low and wary. "What do you want?"

"Speak gently," raspily whispered Zano. "I come to release you."

"Release Prince Toka!" quickly rejected Roya. But the shutter had dropped silently into place. As the door latch barely sounded, swift consideration and daring hope flitted over Roya's fine features and lighted her deeply blue eyes. Poised beside her cell window, she watched the heavy blue door ease out to admit the hairy filthiness of the evilly grinning Zano. Walking quickly and surely forward, she softly and urgently stated, "Quick, let us release the others!"

But the cell was small, and the brutally burly Zano blocked her way, pulled the heavy door unlatchedly to. Zano's insinuating whisper matched his eye. "We must plan first, Fair Roya, else all will go awry."

Despite the warning thing in Zano's eyes, the all too bitter memory of Toka's shattered plan made Roya heed this brute's seeming logic. "Hurry!" she urged. "Before Vola finds out!" She

edged back from the slowly advancing Zano.

"Vola will not come," he slyly assured. "No one will interrupt us—" He grinned loosely. "—as long as we are quiet."

Her heart suddenly leaping in her breast, Roya fought not to show her fear. She had backed to her tiny window. The burly Zano was a grinning and eyeing shaggy blockade halfway up her small cell. Trying to ignore the evil cunning of those eyes as they caressed over her fetchingly displayed loveliness, fighting the fear from her voice, Roya coldly asked, "Your plans—what are they?"

"Many uncertainly conceived events shall occur at the Festival tonight." Zano chuckled gutturally as Roya frowned her ignorance. "But Zano has many sure plans of his own." He idled closer, obviously ready to counter any break.

"Unless you tell me your plans and release me," coldly threatened Roya, "I'll scream."

Zano's hot green eyes only devoured her with anticipation. His loosely grinning lips only twitched savoringly. "The Fair Roya will not scream—and ruin her opportunities."

THE anguish of her choice knifed at Roya. No, she dare not let a chance for escape slip by! Yet what she read in the eyes of that shaggy thing closing in on her! "But if I raise an alarm," she pointed, "the Big Cats will find you and spoil all your plans."

"King Zano knows ways even the Big Cats do not know." He chuckled as he lewdly admired her clean lines of pure body. "The Fair Roya shall remain quiet."

He was less than two paces away. The stinking filth of his shaggy and modest male burliness and the work-

ings of his powerful hairy fingers were sending the repulsive chills creeping over Roya's clean beauty. The twitchings of his loosely drooling mouth were making her breath tight and fast in her breast and throat. The blazing intentions in his eyes were setting her heart to racing frantically. In desperation she held his eyes with hers. With hypnotic intensity of gaze she fiercely tried to beat down his rising incest. But his lecherous desires were flaming through him.

In but another moment he would rush for her with wildly fouling hands and mouth. She would have to scream, fight him off until the jailers came. And another chance for escape would be gone!

Her frantic blood pounding through her, Roya readied desperately. But her throat was dry and tight.

CHAPTER XVIII

DEJECTION weighting him, Toka turned toward his tiny cell window and stood brooding into the sun-bright afternoon. What could he hope to do now? The shrewd and coldly ruthless Vola was even more alert for trickery than before! And Roya and the others would be more dejected than ever after having their suddenly high hopes so abruptly dashed.

Again he gripped his window's bars, coordinated his leanly perfect muscles to terrible effort. But again even his tremendous strength could not budge the bars. And what good would it do if he did break them; the window was too small.

He mentally cursed. His mind was racing in circles! But there must be a way out for Roya and all of them—if only he could see it!

Reining his frantically circling mind to stern control, he stood and stared

down at the squalid City so far below. He studied again, detail by detail, the secret canyon. He recalled, step by step, his trip through the Temple. He dwelt, word by word, and inflection by implication, on each conversation. Somewhere, there was a sign to the way out of all this. There had to be. If only he could see it in time!

CHAPTER XIX

ROYA flicked her eyes from the poised Zano and on past him to the cell door, made her eyes ever so slightly express recognition and welcome, then quickly caught back the expression and returned her attention to the hairy Zano. His blazing green eyes had narrowed, were tinged with uncertainty. His loosely grinning lips twitched as he obviously strained to hear without turning.

Hope swelling in her, Roya again swiftly switched her gaze to the cell door and back. Zano became more uncertain. One hairy hand fingered his heavy knife handle as his other gripped his club tighter. Roya readied, tried to relax outwardly as the unnerved brute poised himself for a swift look.

His shaggy head snapped around. Roya sprang the opposite way, onto her bunk and was leaping along its leathery and springy length. Snarling gutturally at the slick trick, Zano was whirling for her, snatching at her goldenly briefed form. She was past him and leaping from the bunk as he sprang forward with his black club jabbed far ahead of himself.

In midleap Roya saw that club flashing for her legs. She tried to convulse clear. But that ungiving blackness jabbed before one knee and behind her other, and she was spinning toward the blue stone floor. In this split-moment of action, failure was bitter

in her, contorted her face. Her mouth opened and her throat found voice.

As in a nightmare, she heard her scream, "Tok—I"

It was cut short and she did not crash to the floor. Huge hairy hands, one over her mouth, caught her. One hand and fingers tight over her lips and face, the great arms vised around her, their rough shag shocking her smooth flesh. If only Toka—anyone—would come! But how could Toka break out! How could anyone have heard her cut-short scream!

Stark fear chilling through her, Roya fought frantically against being crushed to that filthy body. She strained to wrench her face free of the gagging hand, but in vain. She jammed her hands into the thick chest shag, pushed with desperate strength. The brute features of Zano only mocked her efforts. The great hairy arms crushed tighter around her naked neck and shoulders and nude waist. She kicked her sandaled feet against Zano's shins. The heavy shag cushioned the blows. The brute chuckled gutturally, vised his powerful arms savagely tighter.

Heart pounding near to bursting from her breast, breath tight in her throat, Roya felt her arms begin quivering and giving against Zano's terrible strength. The brute's loosely slobbering mouth was coming irresistibly closer. His bloodshot blazing green eyes were drawing triumphantly nearer. The rough hairiness of his brute belly and chest came against her frantically cringing skin, the heavy shag of his powerful legs and thighs was against her slender straining limbs. Terror slashed its icy knives through her. She felt her resisting arms tremble badly, and give way.

Zano's lowly eager chuckle was foulest Hell in her ears as she felt herself

crushed into his stinking hairiness. The brute's licentious eyes blazed closely into her stark ones. The slobbering lips worked on the hairy fingers over her lips, in readiness to defile her mouth as his fingers would be drawn away. The hairy arms crushed her slim clean beauty tighter against the shaggy body, till her breath was an agonized prisoner in her breast. She could never scream. She fought on, but her horrified senses reeled.

As in a ghastly delirium she heard the far off sound of a cell door slamming wide, of sandaled feet racing with angry urgency.

CHAPTER XX

TOKA stood pondering by his window, his quick and superior intelligence searching for the way out—for even hope of a chance for a way out. But in vain. Seemingly, there was only one hope: be alert, take advantage of the slightest break and—

"Tok—!"

Roya's stopped scream cut through Toka like an icy blade. First came frantic fear, then red rage was boiling through him. He was the length of his cell, grabbing the heavily barred peephole. His shoulder and arm muscles were leaping reptiles of power under his tanness as he wrenched mightily at the bars.

But the heavy door jerked easily open—Lora had not locked it! That was the meaning of her brief intent look!

Mentally cursing himself for a brainless idiot—but not realizing his reason had been engulfed by a maelstrom of personal emotions—Toka was leaping down corridor, slamming Roya's cell door wide and raging in for the damnable brute wrestling her. Wild anger powered Toka's terrible strength. His

fists rang a vicious tattoo to Zano's hairy temple. The shaggy brute only grunted to a stop, dropped Roya and whirled for his annoyer, but putting himself between Toka and the open door. Toka saw the shamefully awry Roya sag into the corner back of him. Her hand went to her throat, fell away as her stark eyes closed and she crumpled into a limp faint on the floor.

But Zano was charging. In a rage Toka's pistoning fists sawed into the hairy features. Again the shagginess was a cushion. The blazing-eyed Zano only snarled, took the savage blows without pause, whipped his heavy knife from belly rope. Toka darted from the flashing blade. It hissed barely clear of his muscled belly. In one split instant of perfectly coordinated motion he kicked. His sandaled foot cracked true to Zano's powerful wrist. Zano grunted. His heavy knife spun from his momentarily shocked grip, careened viciously over Toka's ducked head, ricocheted with a sharp cracking and clattered back on out into the corridor.

One thought blazed in Toka's returning reason. Eliminate Zano, revive Roya, release Rok and the others and get the weapons from the storeroom. Once armed, Toka knew he and Rok and Old Ledo could hold the corridor and cells against all Vola's Big Cats and anyone else, could establish a center of offense and bargain with Vola and the others. The witch couldn't afford that kind of trouble to spread through her Temple now!

Snarling brute rage, hairy arms and hands wide and reaching, Zano again rushed Toka. Fists ready to slam into that filthy face, Toka danced easily aside—and unnervingly felt the forgotten club roll under his foot. He gyrated to recover his balance. The gutturally snarling Zano charged in. One huge hairy arm flailed a massive

first to Toka's ribs with an echoing violence. Unharmed, Toka dropped on away to one knee, scabbled for the club. It had rolled away toward the open door.

But time had flown in this uproar. Snatching up his club, Zano charged on out the doorway, spun to slam the door to. In a fury of speed Toka sprang to prevent the wily Zano's trap. The great blue door chucked to. Its latch clicked a split-instant sooner than Toka's solidly muscled shoulder thumped to the heavy stone panel.

With savagely disgusted anger Toka grabbed the bars of the peephole, wrenched violently at them. The bars nor their door never gave the slightest. And an alarmed bustle was bursting into the corridor.

ROYA had revived sufficiently and recovered her modesty of attire enough to join Toka in listening against the door. He rested his arm fondly around her smooth waist. She turned her eyes up at him, tried to hide her bitter dejection. Her low voice tried to cover the bitterness born of the repeated near successes. "Now what will Volä do?"

Toka tried to cover his own hopelessness. "Let's just be ready for the next break." And let's pray I make better use of the sense God gave me! He listened to the hullabaloo as the priestesses found his cell yawning and empty.

Volä's imperially sure coldness reassured them. "He cannot escape far."

The swift search of the cells came to this one. There was no place to hide, so Toka, Roya likewise, lounged carelessly against the door. The peephole shutter opened, and Volä's self-sure cold features were framed there.

"Greetings," lazily welcomed Toka.

An excited murmur swept the silvery-gowned voluptuous priestesses beyond Volä. Toka could also catch a glimpse of the huge tawny-orange bodies of scores of Big Cats. Volä's gray eyes narrowly considered Toka, then Roya. Roya returned the eyeing with a cool laziness.

Cataloging the cell, and obviously puzzled, Volä studied Toka. "And how did Prince Toka get in there?"

Toka indolently returned Volä's gaze. "Got lonesome. So I strolled out of my apartment and inveigled Roya into sharing her company with me."

Cold anger and a hot amount of jealousy was combusting in Volä's eyes and voice. "Lady Lora must not have locked your cell."

Protecting Lora for future possibilities, Toka shrugged. "It seemed locked when I tried it shortly after she left. Later, it wasn't."

"Why did Roya try to scream your name?"

Toka was pointedly amused. "Our playing became a bit too torrid."

Memories burned in Volä. "Why is this door locked now?"

Toka shrugged. "You know your jail better than I do."

Volä did not know whether to believe him or not. Her priestesses and Big Cats had searched the remaining corridor and cells, and now returned with a respectful but bewildered, "Everything else is perfectly normal, Queen Volä."

Volä checked the latch of this door, made sure it was locked. Her eyes were bitter, ruthless. "Prince Toka is a very adroit liar."

"Queen Volä couldn't be wrong?"

Volä's blue-gowned shoulders shrugged. Her lips quirked. "But it does not really make so very much difference. You will be well cared for—as long as you satisfy my needs."

"I might not prove tractible."

"There are so many means of persuasion."

"Really?"

"Prince Toka may be given the chance to demonstrate his talents during the Festival tonight—possibly even against the Wild One of Zolanda."

The priestesses gasped in excited horror.

"And if I reject this happy opportunity?" tested Toka.

Vola glanced significantly at Roya. "Prince Toka will not reject this opportunity."

Toka covered his anger. "And if I am vanquished?"

Vola shrugged eloquently.

"And if I am victorious?" challenged Toka.

"There will be other chances to perform."

A way was beginning to glimmer. Toka shrugged philosophically for Vola.

SHE smiled coolly, as if to show how little she hungered for him. "Enjoy the fair Roya's company—until the Festival." She drew back and latched the peephole shutter, checked the door latch again.

Roya too, Toka listened against the door, heard Vola and her entourage depart, leaving a priestess and a Big Cat on guard at each end of the corridor. Toka's superkeen hearing could detect no person or beast near this door. He straightened, smiled gently and confidently at Roya, and was heartened when a hesitant smile of hope came to her. First testing the door to make sure it was not unlocked, Toka took Roya's arm, sauntered to the window. He stood with his hand in hers and gazed speculatively over the late afternoon scene in the floor of the canyon.

Roya's voice was barely audible.

"You see a way, Toka?"

He replied with quiet encouragement. "Enough are against Vola to make at least one good way pretty soon. Lady Lora," he bitterly mused, "forgot to latch my cell door." He scowled at having let that chance slip by. "But I was too dumb to see!"

Roya squeezed his fingers with a gentle forgiveness. "Maybe it will be better this way."

"I see Zano got away clean," grimly observed Toka. He pointed to the swaggering hairy hulk just entering the City and keeping to the open places. The memory of his scrap with Zano returned to Toka's consideration. No wonder the brutes could keep competing in those Festivals; their hair was cushion enough for any blow by hands. They could make it a bit unpleasant for a hairless man.

"Zano," reflected Roya, "—another one against Vola."

Toka questioned Roya with a glance.

She covered the memories of her recent horrible experience with a quietly factual manner. "He came with a plan to free me—so he said. But before I could get out to release you . . ." Her regretting emotions took command.

Toka's jaw knotted with anger. "I should have gotten our weapons first and then killed him!"

Roya fought back to self-control and shrugged it all away. "It is past. But during our conversation he mentioned that something is going to happen during the Festival, and implied he had other plans."

"So," mused Toka.

"And there was something else," frowned Roya. "Something he said that sounded out of place."

Toka waited for Roya's intense recollecting to bear fruit.

Her features brightened with discovery, but her blue eyes wondered.

"He called himself King Zano, once."

Toka frowned. "But that big Gori is the only King around the place. Unless . . ." He considered Roya, and she him. Her expression agreed with him. "So," he mused in a grim whisper, "it's Lora against Vola, and Zano against Gori."

"And," softly added Roya, "both Lora and Zano against both Vola and Gori."

"Right," breathed Toka. He smiled thinly. "What a pleasant little rat race of scheming we got into here." He gazed thoughtfully down on the colosseum, where priestesses, accompanied by Big Cats, were directing brute men in readying it. Now, he reflected, wouldn't that Festival be just the very focal point for all this plotting and counter-plotting? "Many things," he mused, "are to happen during that Festival."

"Somebody," sensibly reflected Roya, "is bound to lose."

"And this time," considered Toka, "it won't be the Sandcliff somebodies."

He looked down into Roya's deeply blue eyes as they searched into him. Her confidence in him softly lit her fine features. He gently possessed her slimly rounded loveliness in his lean strong arms. She closed her long-lashed eyelids, raised her ever-fresh lips to his. He lowered his mouth to hers, softly exchanged again the clean love they held for each other.

Somehow — some way — mentally vowed Toka, he would never let this love be broken. He would save it, would save all. The Fates could not turn away. They would—they must—turn his way tonight.

CHAPTER XXI

SWAGGERING boldly through the open center of the City and up to

Gori's front door, Zano gave the knock. Gori opened the blue panel, was surprised to inaction, was obviously confused to see his confidently smirking traitor visiting. Stepping in with fearless mien, Zano slouched down on a heap of filth. Recovering, Gori quickly latched the door. Fingering his vicious knife, he stood in the middle of the odorous room and narrowly speculated on Zano. That one only carelessly scavenged a well-gnawed bone to work on.

Glancing up at the ominous but uncertain Gori, Zano was innocently curious. "King Gori is still worried—now that One Foot is no more?"

This direct approach muddled Gori further. He growled his suspicions. "Zano has just come from the Temple!"

"To report One Foot's demise to Queen Vola," easily agreed Zano.

Gori's shaggy features scowled darkly in the stinking gloom. His bloodshot green eyes blazed his thinly held anger. His knife was in right hand, his wicked club clenched ready in left. "Zano furthers his treachery against King Gori!"

Zano gaped his innocent shock. "What foul tongue says loyal Zano schemes against good King Gori?"

"One Foot's!"

Zano stared his disbelief at Gori's gullibility. "King Gori would believe Queen Vola's traitorous tool?"

Gori relented his menacing mood as his little mind muddled around in this piece of truth.

"A guilty Zano would enter his King Gori's mighty presence?" furthered Zano.

Gori furrowed his seeming foolishness, shifted uncertainly. He growled his defense. "But my followers seemed not loyal!"

"Then King Gori should know what they say!" exclaimed Zano.

Gori's easily touched ego began winning out. "Tell me the truth!"

"As Zano always has," he agreed. He paused to let the build-up sink into Gori's thick intelligence. "King Gori's followers admire his shrewdness and daring in detecting and destroying Queen Vola's tool—" he fed, "—her tool that tried to divide King Gori and his loyal Zano, and so make the good men of Zolanda abject slaves of the evil women of the Temple!"

Gori chuckled his guttural pleasure. Then peered with remaining shreds of suspicion. "But what did Zano do at the Temple?"

Zano smirked his success. "If King Gori's Zano reported One Foot's murder at once, Queen Vola could not believe anyone but the expendable Huk and Kal were guilty."

Gori ponderously reflected. In his eyes showed his feeling of having erred, his relief at having his precious ego so cunningly salvaged. "True."

"And," adroitly fed Zano, "Queen Vola would not believe anything that One Foot may have reported to her—thus she becomes easier victim to King Gori's shrewd plans."

Replacing vicious knife in waist rope, Gori shed his last suspicions. "Truly," he fondly gutturalized, "good Zano serves loyally."

Rising, Zano solemnly accepted the mistaken appropriation. "And tonight, King Gori begins reaping his rich harvest."

"Tonight," lustfully anticipated Gori.

"Zano leaves," bid that one, "to prepare the last details for our great King Gori."

Latching his door after the departing Zano, Gori slouched out on his bed of filth and began dreaming of the lusting to come. Once again the simple and dull mind behind the hairy giant's eyes had not pierced the veil that so cleverly covered Zano's daring cunning.

CHAPTER XXII

ZANO swaggered up his littered walk and steps, entered the stinking squalor of his decadent house. His wariness jerked him to a stop at sight of burly visitors already inside.

"It is only us, good Zano," quickly growled the noseless Huk.

Zano relaxed, regained his self-sure smirk. "Glad to see you, good friends." Locking his door, he slouched down on a filthy heap. Huk and the fanged Kal frowned wonderingly at him. Zano shrewdly considered them. "You told my followers I tricked Gori into killing One Foot and delivering his body to you?"

"And all admire King Zano more than before," assured Kal.

"And even more have turned from Gori and to King Zano for leadership," reported Huk.

"And King Zano has reported One Foot's murder to Queen Vola." Zano preened over his visit there. "And, among other things, Queen Vola and Gori are now centered against each other."

His hearers gawped admiringly.

"More than ever," self-surely went on Zano, "the infant-minded Gori is in descent. And there are the events scheduled at the Festival of which he and Queen Vola know nothing."

Still an unease and fear were in Huk and Kal.

Zano's cunning eyes glittered. His guttural rasp was softly insinuating. "And when King Zano has all Zolanda, Huk and Kal shall be his favorites, shall merely ask for anything in the realm and receive it."

The lust took over in the noseless Huk. His bloodshot green eyes blazed. His heavy lips twitched. "The dark-haired female from far down valley."

Only a coolly discerning watcher

would have noted the sly light in Zano's cunning eyes. But he was surfacely generous. "To good Huk—the dark Elees."

Huk slobbered his anticipation. "King Zano is indeed generous."

Accepting the approbation with a smirk, Zano glanced shrewdly at the licentious reflecting Kal. "And does not good Kal desire something?"

Kal's loose lips grinned from his fanged teeth. His green eyes flamed. "The sun-haired one from down valley."

Zano's shaggy features set hard. His bloodshot green eyes glittered coldly. His guttural rasp was edged. "King Zano takes the Princess Roya."

Kal's brute features jerked at the rebuff. His disappointed gaze shifted away.

"However," softly rasped the sly Zano, "Kal may have his choice of any other girl."

"King Zano is good." Kal brightened somewhat. But his eyes and voice were envious of Huk. "But the next choicest morsel to King Zano's prize is Huk's."

As they rose to leave, Huk grinned self-satisfiedly at the envious Kal.

Smiling slyly as he saw them to the door, Zano watched the jealousy coming between his degenerate tools. "Good prizes in the Festival!" he bid. Securely latching his door, he sprawled on his heap and chuckled over his superb cunning.

CHAPTER XXIII

EVER down into the now ominously silent and empty dim bowels of the great Temple Toka and party were implacably marched. Toka laconically led two paces ahead of the surfacely carefree Rok and Old Ledo, as quietly but pointedly ordered. Two paces behind those two, the outwardly calm

Roya and Elees followed. Two priestesses and malevolently ready Big Cats led the way; one priestess and a Big Cat marched midway on each side; two more priestesses and Big Cats brought up the rear.

Winding down for twelve levels, the parade turned into a broad low passage running straight south, its dimly illumined length converging with distance to a pair of blue doors. As the parade neared there, the muffled maelstrom of sounds again came to the ear, grew louder. It was the raucous howling, yelling and lustful chanting of the brute men, the impatient hammering and thumping of their wicked clubs on echoing stonework.

The Big Cats of the lead priestesses opened wide the great doors. From out the Hell-lit night beyond, the wild sea of sound slammed in and jammed into the ears, hammered against the body and drew the ready battle nerves even tauter.

As the two lead priestesses led out onto the rear of a large square dais of blue, Toka swiftly cataloged the scene of their coming fate. On the dais's fore edge, directly on the high white wall circling the sandy arena, sat an ornate blue and white throne, unoccupied. A small blue drum stood immediately left on the throne. A vari-colored cluster of stiffly upright rope ends dangled their silken tassels immediately to the right.

Aisled banks of comfortably cushioned blue stone chairs, seating now basely excited priestesses, ran to the left from the dais and rose steeply up to the northeast rim of the colosseum. Levels of widely separated small white benches, unoccupied, ran to the right from the dais and sloped steeply from the northwest rim down to arena wall. Secure in the stone flooring before each bench were stout

blue eyelets, through which heavy blue chains ran to ominously waiting manacles.

Directly south across the arena, the brute men of Zolanda were a wild and raucous hairy brown mass packing the bare white seats banking up there. In a spacious blue box on the edge of the wall, and directly down in front of the jammed brute populace, sat the giant Gori and his Zano, backed by two others—one horribly noseless, the other ferociously fanged.

And, wondered Toka, was there a division in the seating of the massed brutes behind that box? Or was it only an over-alert imagination? Yet, even while they raucoused, why did the packed ones up to the right behind Zano exchange surreptitious glances with the massed ones up to the left behind Gori?

But that was not the only explosive present. Crowding each end of the colosseum was a tawny-orange mass of Big Cats, pacing restlessly on the broad blue levels, and only insecurely separated from the immediate company of the brute men by high white stone partitions from arena wall to upper rim. Additional scores of the monstrous beasts patrolled endlessly and nervously around down in the arena.

Spiking the arena wall were hundreds of slender standards, topped by great high-blazing torches. The leaping and chuckling flames flooded their red brilliance over the sandy field and over the masses of spectators and Big Cats, those beasts' yellow eyes blazing even more wickedly greener as the fires reflected in their hating depths.

In mid-arena stood a massive white column, whose flat top was reached by a wide and unenclosed stairway winding around up to it.

At sight of Toka and party, the mass of priestesses began squealing their gross excitement. Gori, Zano and their

hordes began roaring and hammering their wild lust for Roya and Elees and what the girls foreshadowed.

Laconic over his anger and his tautly drawn battle nerves, Toka glanced back. Rok and Old Ledo were sardonically amused, except for their own keenly calculating warrior eyes. Roya and Elees were calmly undisturbed, but for a slight paleness and tightness to the lips and a light of desperate hope in their lovely eyes.

THE two lead priestesses escorted Toka, Rok and Old Ledo to three benches in a row just to the right from the dais. Roya and Elees, Big Cats directly at their naked backs, were seated immediately behind Toka and comrades and the three Big Cats which had taken up sitting guard at their unprotected backs. The priestesses slipped the heavy manacles onto each of the party. With small keys of like wards, they locked each set snug. Each person could stand and sit comfortably, but not one bit beyond that.

"Don't want us to run away," mocked Rok.

The six priestesses took chairs in a row to the great throne's left. The crowds of priestesses continuously squealed and sang out at Toka and Rok and Old Ledo, sang out bold insinuations that made Toka's and his friends' jaws set, their faces crimson and their eyes burn. The packed hordes of brute men across arena constantly howled at Roya and Elees, mouthed words and phrases that sent the outrage boiling through Toka and whipped his stores of great strength to even higher peaks. No doubt Rok and Old Ledo were likewise affected. He met their gazes. His superkeen hearing tuned them in.

Rok's low drawl seethed with rage. "Somebody ought to send them all back

to Hell."

Old Ledo's quietly dry voice was hard with anger. "Hell probably kicked them out."

Toka kept his own voice low, so only the superkeen hearing of Rok and Old Ledo could detect. "Be ready to make it interesting."

The pair briefly eyed him, spoke with their eyes and, like Toka, casually turned to the quiet but undoubtedly also ready Roya and Elees. Again only the eyes needed to speak, past the uncomfortably close Big Cats between.

There was a moment's lessening of a storm of noise as the great doors on the back of the dais swung out. Then the mass of priestesses silenced and respectfully rose as Vola, glittering in her jewels and voluptuous in gown of sheerest royal-blue over gemmed and scantest black, stepped her tall imperial way onto the dais. She was accompanied on either side by her pair of fancily collared Big Cats. Regal face a mask of tensions, deeply gray eyes a smouldering bed of emotions, Lady Lora followed a respectful pace behind. Strolling forward, Vola's royal glance swept leisurely over the five captives to the right of the throne, paused a self-sure moment to coolly mock Toka's keen watching.

Beyond Lora followed three priestesses, carrying the three battle knives and scabbards of Toka, Rok and Old Ledo. The more desirable battle-axes were not evident. But Toka's fighter being sang with hope. And his hands itched to have again even those fine knives.

Covering his rising hopes and eagerness with a laconic mein, Toka watched Vola step before her ornate throne and stand there. Her Big Cats took up crouching positions to her right and left, their malevolent yellow eyes blazing green hate at Toka, Rok and Old

Ledo and the raucously foul brute men across arena.

As she stood respectfully to Vola's right, Lora's eyes held Toka's a hot and enigmatic moment, then jerked away to stare stolidly straight ahead, seemingly to meet Zano's eyes across the arena.

Narrowly considering Lora, Gori tested Zano. "Lady Lora will not fail?"

Zano smirked his ego. "She dare not even hesitate."

Toka's keen but casual glance was not quite sure if that was or was not a small flat knife contouring the right groin of Lora's black scants beneath her silvery sheer gown.

THE three following priestesses carrying the battle knives stood in line at Vola's left. Royal glance sweeping the colosseum and arena with approval, Vola settled herself on her throne. The mass of priestesses sat down, resumed their basely giddy calling and screaming to the Sandcliff men. Vola sharply throbbed her drum. The mad racket paused, the whole colosseum silenced with excited expectancy. The wild eyes of the brute men went to the west end of the arena. Vola pulled a tasseled rope end and a huge pair of doors, which formed a part of the smooth and sheer white wall, slowly swung out.

A silvery gowned priestess, followed by a pair of Big Cats, led out. Then the torch-lit colosseum rocked at the brute men as one began roaring and howling, began hammering their clubs in a mad drumming. The priestesses screamed their base emotions. The hordes of Big Cats quivered from the contagious excitement, began growling softly and raspily in their heavy throats. Vola amusedly watched.

Into the arena were slowly marching the thousands of captive girls, four abreast, each quartet manacled to-

gether by heavy blue wristlets and chains. Big Cats paced supplely along on either side of the march. Priestesses sauntered along and evidently spoke commandingly to the captives. The march was circling the arena for the brute men's inspection. Breathlessly shown in their varicolored scant sarongs, the lovely girls were weeping and stumbling with pitiful terror.

Vola pulled another of the tasseled rope-ends, and the great curved doors at the end of the arena closed smooth. Again the captive girls were marched around for inspection, whipping the brute men to an even wilder clamor. Toka's compassion ached for the captive creatures. Yet his stark concern was even more with Roya and his party.

As the head of the march neared the throne a second time, Vola again pulled a tasseled rope-end. A segment of the wall directly down in front of the banks of empty benches swung swiftly out and down into the arena, forming a ramp up which the priestesses and Big Cats led the captives. The helplessly manacled captives were seated, were further chained to the eyelets in the floor, with Big Cats and priestesses standing ready guard behind each row.

Vola glanced to the east. The full moon was just riding clear of the canyon rim, was adding its pale silver light to this Hell-fired scene. Vola throbbed her drum. The wild colosseum silenced. Anticipation was taut in the torch-red night. Vola faced straight to the box of the freely lustful Gori and the evilly confident Zano.

Vola's throaty contralto carried with an imperial ring. "The full moon rides clear in the east! Are the men of Zolanda ready?"

Gori arose in majestic massiveness. His shaggy face was lecherous eagerness. His guttural growl, excited with

lust, carried strong. "Zolanda's men wait with impatience for Queen Vola's prizes! Let the Festival begin!"

A wild howling and hammering of agreement exploded from the hairy hordes, engulfed the colosseum. It set the pitch for the priestesses' flood of eager screaming. But it did not quite smother the undertone of the nervous Big Cats' low growling. Under his coolly spectating manner, Toka's warrior being was tautly alert, as he well knew Rok and Old Ledo were under their manners, and Roya and Elees under theirs.

VOLA waved to the priestesses guarding the captive girls. From the front row, a priestess and a Big Cat escorted a manacled quartet out to the top of the massive column in mid-arena, freed them and returned, leaving on guard on the winding stairway one of the Big Cats which were patrolling the arena.

Strangely, Gori's men had silenced, were looking to Gori. The priestesses quieted, frowned around.

Vola throbbed her drum. Her voice rang out. "Do no men of Zolanda wish to combat for the prizes in the arena?"

The unnatural silence held. Toka judged Vola's frown was not too real with surprise as she faced to Gori.

Insinuation was clear in Gori's guttural reply. "The men of Zolanda prefer the choicest be offered first!"

Toka felt the angry fear gripping at him.

Vola was only amused at Gori. "And which ones do Zolanda's men consider choicest?"

"The pair from far down valley!"

A raucous howling and emphatic hammering exploded from the hordes. Vola shrewdly considered, lowered the ramp and waved. The four manacled

girls were returned to their benches. Toka seethed with anger. He and Rok and Old Ledo whirled to face Vola. Her glance mocked them. The Big Cats guarding them snarled low warnings. Roya and Elees were taut and white of fine features. Terror filled their eyes.

A pair of priestesses, smiling evil anticipation, came up to Roya and Elees, began freeing their manacles only from the eyelets. Roya's and Elees's wide eyes pleaded to the helplessly chained Toka, Rok and Old Ledo. The Big Cats guarding them all snarled warningly, their breaths hot with hate. The torch-and-moon-lit colosseum was a crazy bedlam of sound. The anguish, the utter helplessness of this moment, slashed through Toka. Vola was coldly enjoying him. The Big Cats readied. One move, no matter how vain in these manacles, and the great beasts would be wielding those huge paws!

Then something in Lora's intent eye cut through Toka's thoughts. "It'll be all right, Roya, dearest," he quietly assured.

"Don't give up, Elees, darling," whispered Rok in his own anguish.

Roya and Elees questioned with glances, nodded, and were taken away down through the weeping and wondering captive girls, and down the ramp. The lusty hordes desiring their clean blonde and brunette loveliness, the leaping torches and brilliant moonlight bathing all with a Hellish brightness, Roya and Elees appeared helplessly tiny and painfully lovely—atop the massive column in mid-arena.

Vola drummed the scene to silence. "Who will do combat for those prizes?"

Again the brute men only sat silent, looked to Gori.

He stood. "I!"

Zano stood up. "I!"

Vola's drum silenced the excited mumbling. She asked the routine, "What weapons would challenger Zano use?"

Zano paused for effect. "Knives!"

A gasp swept the colosseum. But the giant Gori only turned to grin at his lieutenant.

Clearly sensing the expectancy Gori's and Zano's act caused among their now patently divided followers, Toka could only guess at the pair's conversation. "A duel in name only, eh, good Zano?"

"In name only, King Gori," softly rasped Zano. As the silently chuckling Gori returned his gaze to the blonde and brunette prizes and tossed a rope ladder over the wall, Zano's eyes lingered casually to Huk and Kal and the segment of men massed up to the right. The eyes of Huk and Kal and the others acknowledged, and Zano followed Gori down the ladder.

"Keep quiet now," muttered Toka to Rok and Old Ledo, and turned from the speculating pair and over toward Vola. And was she expecting just this?

SHE drummed the excited colosseum to silence. Gori and Zano stepped from the ladder, were watched by a Big Cat as they waited the command to advance and begin combat. But all eyes wondered at Vola. Her voice was lazily urging. "Yes, Prince Toka?"

Toka's voice rang out on the night. "I challenge both King Gori and Zano!"

A gasp of amazement at this audacity rippled through the colosseum. A small smile quirked Vola's mouth. She glanced to Gori and Zano, beside their ladder. The hairy pair exchanged quizzical glances. Toka waited tensely, could not hear.

Gori's low growl was suspicious.

"And what make you of this, good Zano?"

Zano's cunning eyes were momentarily troubled, suspicious of Gori. Then he shrugged it away, again had the shrewd light. "What can one of him do against two of us, but make King Gori's victory even more impressive?"

Gori considered ponderously. His precious ego won. "Again Zano proves his worth to King Gori."

Again Zano switched an indifferent glance to Huk and Kal, watching from the box.

Gori's derisive growl echoed across the tautly silent colosseum. "What weapons would the hairless foreigner desire?"

Toka met Vola's inquiring glance. His battle-ax would have soured his chance anyway. Was that why Vola had not had those great weapons brought out. Toka sneered at Gori and Zano. "My one knife against both your knives and clubs!"

The colosseum was stunned to silence at this rash daring, and looked to Gori and Zano.

Vola challenged the pair. "Does King Gori and Zano accept?"

Gori and Zano exchanged eloquent glances, grinned. Gori's growl was over-confident. "We accept!"

The vast colosseum became crazed with excitement.

Beckoning Toka be unmanacled, Vola turned to the three priestesses holding the Sandcliff weapons. "Give Prince Toka his knife and scabbard!"

One priestess stepped over and handed the fancy battle knife and scabbard to Toka as he obediently stood before the cool Vola. Toka buckled his weapon about his waist, shifted it into the old familiar readiness. Vola's Big Cats were ready too, eyeing him. Toka tendered Vola a

sardonically speculating glance, turned, met the eyes of Rok and Old Ledo, and strode away toward the ramp. Toka also saw the hope brighten over Roya and Ellees. And his great strength surged through him even more powerfully.

The ramp drawn up behind him, Toka put the sea of sound into the background, concentrated on Gori and Zano. Vola's drum throbbed the signal, one echoing beat. Sparing no glances for each other, Gori and Zano drew their knives and loped confidently for the area of the column steps. But on legs of easy superspeed, Toka was there a dozen paces sooner, was idling to a stop.

Toka's great black battle knife was comrade to his right hand and fingers. The bright moonshine and leaping torchlight shimmered silver and fire from its ravenous length and from the broad keen shafts of Gori's and Zano's deadly blades.

Zano now a curious pace behind and to his right, Gori ran in watchfully. Each ugly seemed confident of destroying his opponent. And if Gori should destroy the foreigner, and Zano should destroy Gori while the giant King was thus usefully occupied. . . .

Toka hoped his own expression became one of trepidation. He trembled his knife hand, shifted uneasily, backed a hesitant step. Keenly watching faces lighting with triumph in their shag, Gori and Zano cast caution to the night and rushed as the colosseum roared and screamed its delights and fears. Still Zano lagged oddly back of Gori. Toka acted his role till the pair were but five and six paces distant, then his keen fighter body flexed, his supplely lean right arm whipped. And the great battle blade was a black blitzer streaking through the torch-red night for Zano.

GORI was shocked to a stop, crouched warily. Toka was racing straight after his thrown knife. Face startled and straining with his effort, the surprised Zano was trying to stop and dodge. He clubbed frantically at the oncoming length of Death. But Toka's renowned battle blade sang true. It hit home, chucked its ravenous black length hilt-deep into Zano's heart area. The brute gasped, reeled wildly, clutched madly at his burly chest of filthy hair, and went down.

Though the feminine screaming of approval crescendoed, the blood-thirsty howling of the brute men in the stands abruptly ceased. In one split-instant's glance Toka saw the apparent division of the men had been killed away; the two factions considered the fallen Zano, then each other, nodded acceptance of reality, and again all were as one—under the slow-minded Gori.

Toka also saw that Gori had finally perceived the same news. The giant now recovered from his double surprise, was leaping for the yet unarmed Toka—to get him before he could reach his knife from Zano's chest.

Toka was to the sprawled Zano a full five steps ahead of Gori. There was no time to search the shifting sandiness for the added armor of Zano's knife and club. Snatching his redly dripping battle blade clear, Toka whirled to parry the giant Gori. The great shaggy brute weaved to a crouching stop, four paces away. His blood-shot green eyes were blazing, his hairy features working with hate but also with an animal intelligence which told him his opponent was too skilled.

And Toka paused. The same thought was in his mind, in all minds: the one who bested Gori not only won the girls atop the column but also became leader

of the brute men—and became a threat to Volá's rule. But Rock and Old Ledo were still in manacles, up there near the throne.

Though a species of relief had touched Lora's features at the latest turn, she yet had fear in her eye.

Volá read it. "Lady Lora feels safer with Zano no more?"

Lora turned her revealing eyes away. "Only partly, Queen Volá. If the Prince Toka wins now, he holds the men of Zolanda."

Volá smiled sardonically. "And Queen Volá holds the Big Cats."

Lora faced stolidly into the arena. Keenly eyeing the consternated Huk and Kal in Gori's box, Volá purred to her Big Cats, saw the message softly relayed to every beast, and quietly turned to the priestesses holding the remaining Sandcliff knives there.

As he leaned to the fanged Kal, the noseless Huk's voice was fearful, his shaggy face panicky. "All is lost—King Gori will kill us!"

Groping at any straws, Kal found a life raft. "Not if we help him best his present opponent!"

Frantic hope leaped in Huk. "Come on!" He led the way over the wall and down the ladder.

TOKA coolly estimated Gori and returned the brute's size-up as the vast colosseum rocked with roaring and screaming for blood, more blood. The shaggy Gori was poised, ready for any lightning move or counter-move. The brute men were raucous for Gori. The priestesses were squealing and screaming for Toka. And another feminine pleading came—from the captive girls; knowing a man they could trust, a man so much in their own situation, a man who gave them a daring hope that this Hellish nightmare might be escaped.

Gori's glance jerked past Toka and to the brute men's stands, and brightened with renewed confidence. Toka snatched a backward glance. The Big Cats in the arena strangely ignoring them, the noseless and fanged cohorts of Gori were racing forward, blue knives flashing viciously in the fire light and moonshine as they closed for Toka's rear. Surely Volá couldn't allow *that* now!

From the corner of his eye Toka saw Gori charging. Toka was a streak aside. Gori countered as swiftly, closed with a rush. Toka spun clear again, and his heart leaped as he saw Rok and Old Ledo, battle knives in expert hands, vault the arena wall and streak to the fight with their battle cries yelling through the storm of sound flooding the colosseum. They were angling to intercept the other brutes. Gori caught Toka's expression, heard that chilling warrior cry. He whirled, was startled at the armed newcomers.

At once Toka's arm was whipping. Again his battle blade was singing blackly through the fiery night and he was leaping to follow it in. Gori spun back, features startled and straining as he saw the coming knife. He sprang sideways in a blur of speed. But too slow. Once more that angry blade bit too true. It socked into Gori's shaggy chest, slashed through the heart within. Gori's great body stood rigid and his loose mouth of dirty teeth gasped wide. His evil features writhed with agony. The great hands clutched the filthy chest as Death reeled the giant down and sprawled him on the sand.

Toka snatched his knife from the chest, whirled to see Rok and Old Ledo. They were just drawing truly thrown bloody knives from a shaggy pair of dead hulks. Weapons ready in hands, they were running lightly and swiftly to

join Toka.

Stunned to silence by the swiftly effective knife work, the great colosseum was now engulfed by brute men roaring, howling and hammering approval of their new King, and by the priestesses and captive girls squealing and screaming their admiration.

THE impatient Rok and Old Ledo joined Toka at the foot of the stair winding to the top of the column. Roya and Elees were at the top's edge, their fiercely hopeful and starkly anxious fine features peering down. But quarter-way up the stair, a Big Cat crouched blockingly, snarling low, malevolently eyeing the trio below here. The beast also kept glancing to Volá.

Rok's voice was low and grim through the wild bedlam. "We win but we lose, eh?"

Old Ledo's observation was dry, but was as cool as his mind. "I don't like the way the rest of the Big Cats are acting."

Toka had also noted the increased restlessness stirring and low growling of the thousands of beasts in the stands and the scores patrolling around the base of the arena wall. Toka's gaze centered keenly on Volá and Lora. Some difference seemed taking place.

Volá's glance was amused at the surfacely uncertain Lora. "Lady Lora still sees something to fear?"

Lora continued her effort to cover, but her lack of disappointment crept through. "With their women, the three superb warriors are free, with battle knives which they can wield with lightning certainty. And the Prince Toka is now the adulated King of all Zolanda's men."

"True, Lady Lora." Volá's eyes mocked her lady. "But is not everything as I have planned?"

Lora's glance was startled. "Queen

Vola planned it this way?"

Vola preened with royal ego. "I have used the Sandcliff ones to destroy the annoying Zano and his pair of fools, and to remove the interfering and would-be ruler of Zolanda—King Gori."

Lora reflected on this amazing adroitness. "But the Prince Toka has ideals—perhaps too high to allow him to cooperate in Queen Vola's plan."

The imperially sure Vola was sardonic. "The new King is squeamish in some ways, at present. But even at this moment he knows that he cannot long deny his new-found followers their demands for the captive girls."

Impatience seething through him, Toka waited for Vola's gesture that would dismiss the Big Cat from the column's stairway. The massed priestesses had become comparatively quiet as they waited for Vola's action. But the excitement over the swift battle with Gori and Zano and the other pair was leaving the hordes of brute men; they were beginning to chant and howl and hammer for the captive girls to be offered.

Cries of help tremelod from the thousands of manacled girls. Toka felt the lovely creatures' pleading faces pressing on him. "Save us, O gallant ones!" they beseeched. "Do not put us into the hands of your new followers!"

The brute men's clamor grew more demanding. Toka's emotions were in a wild turmoil. His love was with Roya, as Rok's was with Elles, and Old Ledo's for both. Toka's swelling hope was for their own escape. How could they include thousands of others? Yet his manly morals were vicious rebels against this line. His innate compassion clamored to aid those fellow captives, free them from the unspeakable horror at the hairy hands of

the filthy brute men!

"Now what's that she-devil going to do?" sardonically posed Rok.

"Don't forget her kittens," dryly warned Old Ledo.

AS ONE, the restless Big Cats were intently watching Vola, watching for some command. Vola turned to her pair of collared monsters beside her; a purring swept the colosseum, and the great beast on the stairway strode down and joined the others that had been partolling the arena. Instantly the stairway had been cleared, Roya and Elees ran down into Toka's and Rok's strongly welcoming arms and kisses.

"Oh, Toka, dearest," fervently breathed Roya in thanks. Then anxiety touched her again, and the same anguished compassion he felt for those thousands of captive girls was in her lovely blue eyes. "Couldn't we save them, too?"

"Haven't saved ourselves yet." Instantly Toka despised himself for his short and callous reply.

Old Ledo's low warning cut clear. "Look out—she's pulling something up there."

The colosseum had silenced into tautly wondering expectancy. The Big Cats partolling the arena had disappeared into the stands. Vola sat on her throne, the tasseled end of a red rope in her right hand. Lora was evidently tensed by desperate emotions. One of Vola's collared Big Cats was closely watching Lora, the other beast already poised for any interference.

"So the fair Roya thinks those arms are haven!" Vola's gray eyes glittered her consuming jealousy. Her throaty contralto was low and ruthlessly cold. "Let her see the Wild One make Queen Vola ruler of the Zolanda men!"

"No!" The pale Lora's word re-

leased all her anguish and bitterness, all her long-pent hate and envy. "They have served your purpose enough this night! Let them live! Your Big Cats can surely capture many more Sandcliff men and women!" Lora's hand was resting in on her scant waistband. "Let these live!"

Vola's Big Cats tauted low in their crouches, snarled deep in their great throats. Vola sneered her imperial despise for Lora's protests. Lora knew she was beyond return to grace, yet her eyes blazed determinedly into Vola's.

"Lady Lora has made a most excellent suggestion." With royal savor, Vola enjoyed the moment. "With many more Sandcliff men and women to be captured, there is no longer the slightest reason for our present guests." Right hand gripping that tasseled rope-end, Vola's smile challenged her lady.

Lora tauted, then relaxed. She stood there wilted, her features bitter with defeat. The Big Cats relaxed. Mocking her beaten lady with silent laughter, Vola was yanking that tasseled rope-end. And a suddenly desperate Lora was leaping, was flashing a small blue knife in a deadly arc. As she frantically twisted to clear her attacker, the suddenly stark-eyed Vola gasped a purr to her Big Cats. But Lora was snarling her final triumph, was driving her keen blade into that swell of Vola's left breast. She buried the ravenous length deep, was twisting it to drain that ruthlessly evil life away—before the swiftly acting Big Cats destroyed the mad assassiness with their great flashing claws and gnashing teeth.

A RIPPLE of horror and surprise shot through the great colosseum. Then an explosion of terrified howls and screams and Big Cats' enraged roaring blasted the fiery night. Stark panic

swept the air. Toka's superkeen eyes caught it all. His deductive faculties perceived the coming reaction.

His voice rang with authority. "Up to the top of the column!"

The girls were running fleetly up the winding stairway, Old Ledo next, Toka and Rok last. The effort was as nothing to Toka's great innate strength. He knew Rok and Old Ledo were as he.

Rok's wondering voice was easy. "What do you suppose is going to come from that hole Vola opened in the wall below the dais?"

They made another upward spiral of the stairway, could see again the area referred to. Toka observed, "Take a look."

"Some kitty!" observed Rok.

The Big Cat racing from the tunnel opening was a monster among the gigantic Big Cats, was rough of blackly banded tawny-orange coat, was gaunt and ravenous with desperate hunger. Its huge yellow foreteeth down-curved long as a man's full arm and glistened with vicious keenness. Its great yellow eyes blazed green fires of demented hate and untamable wildness. Its great toothed maw yawned wide as again and again its deeper blood-curdling roars blasted through the deafening pandemonium filling this night. Its wild eyes centered on the figures racing up the column. And it was a tawny-orange streak for the foot of the stairway.

Toka and Rok leaped to the top of the column. It was round, flat, no more than four paces across. The white-faced Roya and Elees were peering down over the far edge, viewing the horror taking place throughout the great colosseum. At Vola's death, the thousands of Big Cats had gone berserk, were raging through the frantically scattering priestesses and brute men. The crazed beasts' echoing roars ceased only for

the moment their vicious teeth gnashed home on starkly screaming victims. In these scant instants even, the Big Cats' great teeth and claws and tawny-orange bodies were soppling and dripping red. Rivers of the life color ran on the colosseum's stonework, crimson blobs and butchered things islanding the carmine streams.

Evidently believing the brute men and priestesses responsible for Vola's death, the great beasts had, so far, not touched the helplessly manacled and terrified screaming captive girls.

A gasp escaped Roya and Elees.

Roya's quiet voice was stark. "That biggest one is racing up the stairs for us!"

Toka's command carried the grimness. "You and Elees lie down there and don't move!"

Rok and Old Ledo were set of face. Their eyes knew. On this small area, high atop this column, with only three battle knives against the great Wild One, it wouldn't be nice. But the miracle powers of their Sandcliff diet should help.

"Flank me," quietly ordered Toka. He poised where stair curved up to meet top. He had the assurance that Rok and Old Ledo, battle knives shimmering viciously in adroit hands, were as determined as he. Great battle blade of renown ready, warrior muscles and nerves singing taut for action, Toka watched the bend of stair. His superkeen hearing strained for the first warning.

A SWIFT padding of heavy feet sounded through the whole horrible nightmare below. A great black snout, stiff long tactile whiskered, arm-long down-curving teeth flashed into vision. The green blaze of hate in the huge yellow eyes leaped higher as they caught Toka. A roar shook this high

night as the monstrous beast shot up to the attack.

Toka stood and flashed his great blade into its very face and sliced through that sensitive nose tip. Blasting a roar of pain, the beast recoiled to a crouched stop on the top turn of steps. Without pause its massive forepaws, long needle-keen claws shimmering blackly, ripped viciously. Even as he had to give, Toka's angry blade glittered back, clicked through one set of those great toenails and scattered them away into the wild night.

The Big Cat roared without cease, its hot breath a stench in Toka's face. Toka was a streak from that other set of intact claws. But they caught his leg, shredded away near all his golden briefs and ripped him deeply from cleanly muscled tan thigh to knee. But the ugly leg wound healed at once with loss of no more than drops of blood. And by this split-instant of time Rok and Old Ledo were also in, black blades flashing viciously. But the Big Cat was now quarterway onto this small top.

In another mad instant Rok's and Old Ledo's desperate blades had slashed the huge forepaws to clawless and crimson-spraying ribbons. Toka's blade was a black glitter darting past those dangerously bashing paws. It rang against those huge foreteeth, spewed sparks, slashed the black lips as its point bit into that cavernous mouth.

Instantly the monstrously toothed maw snapped, vised viciously on Toka's blade. But that weapon was of a strength renowned. The stiff tactile whiskers prickling against his hand and forearm, Toka's leanly powerful arm and shoulder muscles leaped under his tan skin, knotted mightily as he twisted his famous blade and snatched it clear.

But even for the lightning-swift

moment it all took, he paid. He couldn't convulse soon enough from one bloody paw. It flailed to his ribs with an echoing wham that reeled his senses and churned his viscera. It slammed away his breath in one hoarse rasp and hurled him spinning away. As he crashed rolling near the quietly watching Roya and scrambled back into the desperate combat, the ever-ferociously fighting Big Cat opened its mouth and that spine-prickling roar began again. The beast's great pink tongue hung in its mouth by a mere shred of flesh, was streaming blood. Wider and wider the endlessly attacking Big Cat opened its mouth and mightier and mightier that terrible roar grew and blasted out over this wild night, echoed away and back in mounting volume. Then it was cut short as that blood-gushing mouth snapped shut. The mad beast gulped once, resumed its terrible roaring from a tongueless mouth. And its own flesh and blood only crazed it more.

BLOOD was hot and wet on Toka and fellow, was slicking this stone top. But Toka adroitly ducked a bashing paw. He heard it thud to a body, heard an anguished gasp, heard Roya and Elees emit faint cries of dismay. Toka glanced. Old Ledo was gone. And the insanely roaring and attacking Big Cat had edged half onto the small top. Toka and the gorily dripping Rok were in dead center. The bloodily spattered Roya and Elees were lying but two paces back of them, on the very edge.

There seemed no thwarting the crazed beast. The red-streaming knives only madded it more, made it only more insensate to pain. Grim resolve flashed through Toka's keenly searching but desperately fearing mind.

His order to Rok was cool and clear. "Draw it left—I'm going for its throat."

His finely fighting comrade's reply was typically cool and laconic. "Good necking." His skilled blade began flashing with even greater fury.

On legs and feet of lightning speed Toka darted aside, then forward. He flashed past the Big Cat's red-gushing maw and leaped for its huge shoulders. He lit prone on the heavy coat of blood-slippery hair. The massive sheaths of muscles underneath writhed with terrible power. Even as it fought on against Rok and forced that valiant warrior back, the monstrous beast convulsed its blood-oiled shoulders.

But Toka's desperate toes were dug into the gaunt ribs. His ruthless fingers were wound into the thick red-wet fur under the throat. His knife was flashing down and coming up, clearing his other hand and arm. The vicious blade was biting through the sopped throat fur and heavy hide, was slashing through the wrist-thick tough neck cords.

Even as the great bloody head snapped back and up the Big Cat continued to convulse violently in effort to shake its coming death.

But Toka's hungry blade only bit deeper, was slicing through the gristly tubing of the great windpipe, to cut short the demented roaring of the beast. The Big Cat contorted on in a frenzy of action. One of its great wildly batting forepaws thudded wetly to Rok's knife arm and chest. Bony cracklings threaded through the sea of sound. Rok's red-running battle knife spun away. Yet even as the gallant warrior rolled dazedly toward the far side of the top his horrible fractures were healed sound. On the very lip of rolling off, he caught himself. But the Big Cat was freely lunging on for the stark-faced Roya and Elees.

Toka's desperate battle blade was plunging on up its bloody route, was

slicing through the tough flexibility of the great pulsating throat artery, was releasing its wild river. The hot blood hosed over Roya and Elees and flooded the small top with more slippery redness.

In its frenzied death throes the Big Cat was skidding for the edge. Toka let go of the violently dying monster, scrambled to jump clear. Roya's and Elees' screams of horror and fear chilled through him. The recovered Rok was leaping to help him. The frantically convulsing and blood-spewing Big Cat was falling clear. Toka snatched for the top's edge. His fingers caught. The drawn-faced Rok was reaching. But the edge was sloppy with blood. Toka's fingers slid off. He relaxed for the drop, glanced down.

The stairway was four paces below. The Big Cat struck there, jounced off into the fiery and silvery night, convulsing as it plunged for the arena's sandiness. Toka lit lightly on the stairway.

A SWIFT survey revealed the gory and now silent colosseum and arena deserted of Big Cats, except for the massive carcass of the Wild One crashing and sprawling brokenly down there now. The rest of the beasts were racing through the moonlighted City and for the canyon's exit, were returning to their wild state. The captive girls were yet unharmed, were dazedly and silently watching the bloody victors on the column. And an anxiously thankful Roya and Rok and Elees were racing down the winding stairway toward Toka.

Keen eyes surveying Toka's goriness and uncomfortably near nakedness, Rok grinned. "Okay?"

"So far." Toka shamelessly possessed and was strongly taken by Roya. Her loveliness and her kiss were sweet

Heaven. Dimly, he heard Rok and Elees similarly occupied.

"Well," cut through a dryly sarcastic observation, "doesn't anybody care what happened to me?"

Toka turned with swift remembrance to gladly eye the blood-soiled Old Ledo, standing wide-legged, scowling-faced, but unharmed and twinkling-eyed on the lower steps here.

"Old Ledo!" welcomed Rok. "You're okay, too?"

Old Ledo sniffed professional disdain. "Big Cat popped me down onto the stairway. I was just coming up now to help finish the thing."

Though it had seemed an endless nightmare, the whole action had taken but a bare handful of swift time.

"But of course," went on Old Ledo, "since I'm not even missed . . ."

"We did so miss you," cooed Elees, and she and Roya were hugging and kissing the now redly embarrassed old gentleman.

"Hmmmmmm!" loudly mused Rok as he stepped on down. "Toka, since we are now the ones no longer appreciated, suppose you and I descend and see what those thousands of delicious, delightful, lovely captive damsels have to say to us?"

"An excellent idea, Rok," soberly agreed Toka, and made to follow.

A small cool hand instantly hooked onto his arm. Roya was piquant. "You shall have company, my dearest lout."

Toka warmed.

A small hand had also possessed Rok's arm. Elees was soberly sly. "Besides, those girls must have their own fish already."

Rok smiled broadly.

Old Ledo brought down the rear of the descending party. "But just what are we going to do with all those women?"

"Simple," replied Toka.

"How simple?" quested Roya with ominous quietness.

"Take them all home with us and start up a harem?" grinned Rok.

SIGHING "regretfully," Toka ignored Roya's pinch in his ribs. "Nope. Beyond doubt, their people are searching the whole valley for them. So, just turn them loose and let them live in the Temple until they're found. They can keep a lookout in the canyon entrance and put up a signal of some sort big enough to be seen up and down the valley."

"And the dear little hairy boys?" politely posed Rok.

"If those Big Cats left even one of those pretty specimens around the place," dryly observed Old Ledo, "I will personally skin said specimen for a door mat."

"So it's all settled," sighed Elees.

"Except," posed Roya, "what we are going to use to soothe ourselves as we stroll back to dear old Sandcliff. You know, it isn't one day over a hundred from here by sore foot."

Toka grinned. "We shall travel in our customary royal ease."

"Elucidate," urged Rok.

"We recover our knives and axes," instructed Toka. "And, down near the Big Brown, we chop down trees and tie them together with vines."

"Rafts!" sang Elees as they all reached the gory arena and started toward the captive girls.

"And," dreamed Roya, "we float lazily down the Big Brown river."

"Yes," dryly interjected Old Ledo as they hurried to release the patiently waiting captive girls. "And I hope you brats have had enough of this gallivanting over the country for a while."

THE END

MODERN FIRE-WALKERS



By PETE BOGG



ON THE island of Mbengga once every year a plant, dracaena, which grows on the grassy hillsides, is ready to yield sugar from its fibrous root. To make the roots ready to eat it is necessary to bake them among hot stones for four days. So a large pit is dug and filled with rocks and blazing logs. When the flames have died down and the stones are white hot, it is time to put the roots in the oven. At this time the members of a certain clan called Na Ivilankata, who are in favor with the gods, jump into the oven and walked unharmed on the hot stones, which would scorch the feet of any other person. At one time the occasion was witnessed by several Europeans. They said that fifteen men walked unharmed through the furnace while tongues of fire leaped up among the white hot stones. The pit was nineteen feet wide and the men marched all around in it. When they came out of the pit their feet were examined and they showed no signs of burns. Even the anklets of dried fern leaves were unburned. The immunity of this clan in the fiery furnace is explained by a legend that in former days a chief of the clan received this privilege from a god whom the chief had dragged out of a pool of water, thus saving his life.

CHILDREN OF THE MOON



By J. R. MARKS



SOME of the Indians of California called meteors "children of the moon," and whenever young women saw one they fell to the ground and covered their heads. They feared that if the meteor saw them, their faces would become ugly and diseased. The Tarahumares of Mexico thought that a shooting star was a dead sorcerer coming to earth to even the score with a man who had harmed him in life. So whenever they saw one they grouped together and screamed in terror. A German traveler who was living in the Bororos of central Brazil, saw a large meteor fall, spreading fear through the Indian village. They thought it was a dead medicine man who suddenly appeared in this form to announce that he wanted meat, and that he meant to give someone an attack of dysentery. All the inhabitants rushed out of their huts like angry ants, screaming and spitting at the part of the sky where they had seen the meteor. They built a circle of watch-fires, and in the middle were two painted sorcerers, reeling and staggering in frantic excitement. They pressed one of their hands to their yelling mouths and in the other hand they held a bundle of cigarettes out to the meteor. They thought this gift would ward off the danger of the impending visitation of the angry star.



Satan's foot caught the demon squarely and sent him flying backwards . . .

THE DEVIL TO PAY

by John and Dorothy de Courcy

It would take a lot, probably, to make the Devil take note of one mere mortal. But this mortal had a plan that shocked even the Devil . . .

SATAN stalked back and forth in his immense, golden throne room. "A mere mortal!" he screamed. "A mere mortal dares to put himself above me! ME!"

"But your Unholiness," his chief demon protested, "he doesn't believe—"

Satan kicked him viciously in the stomach. "Don't interrupt!" he snarled.

The demon maintained a discreet silence until the storm abated. During the lull that followed, the demon tried again. "Your Foulness," he said timidly, "I don't think—"

"So you've discovered it too, eh, Ragi!" Satan interrupted.

With a mumbled, "Yes, Sire," Ragi gave up.

"Emperor of the world!" Satan hissed. "What gall! What brass! Why I'll tear him into—" He paused, a frown of puzzlement settling over his saturnine features. "By the way, how did he pull it off?"

"I was about to explain, your Vileness," the demon said hesitantly.

"Don't try to justify yourself! Just give me the facts!"

"He has a bomb," replied Ragi.

Satan snorted. "A bomb! What is he going to do, commit suicide

if they don't make him Emperor?"

"No, Sire," the demon added hastily. "He's going to blow up the world."

"Preposterous! It can't be done. I've tried it myself."

"I wouldn't know," Ragi answered. "But he hasn't tried it yet. It sets off a chain of atomic disintegration and sounds practical."

"Why doesn't someone take it away from him?"

"He has it attuned to his mind in some way. He can set it off by merely willing and if, and when, he does, it will explode."

"And those mortals believe that?" Satan roared.

"He was head of the World Atomic Research Laboratories, Sire, and it adds much weight to his words."

Satan stood in deep concentration for a moment and then glared balefully at the demon. "It just might work," he admitted. "I can't take the chance of having the world blown to bits over my head. There wouldn't be anyone left to torment!" He shuddered at this thought. "Well—, if no one else is going to do anything about this, I guess it's up to me," he growled. "This is degrading! Satan saving the world! Agghh!" He turned to Ragi with an evil smile. "I'm making this your job! Go steal the bomb and bring it to me!"

"I—I—can't," Ragi replied in a small voice. "He—he—wears it on a belt next to his body. He's never without it."

Satan drew back his foot, then stopped. "Wears it on him, eh? When is he to be officially proclaimed Emperor?"

"Day after tomorrow, your Rottenness," Ragi said.

The Devil gnawed on a knuckle thoughtfully. "When did he make his ultimatum to the world?"

"Ah—, eight days ago, Sire."

SATAN'S eyes lighted up diabolically. "Ha! Why didn't you tell me? Were you keeping it for your own little secret? Do you think I'm getting so old that I can't handle my own affairs?"

"No, your Foulness, I was only trying—, that is, —I didn't think that the whole world would take it seriously. Or—"

"Did I send you up to the surface to THINK? No! I sent you up to bring me information! Why I could get quicker service from an almanac! If I had known in time, maybe I could have done something! On second thought, I can STILL do something—to you! Guards!"

"What are you going to do, Sire?" asked Ragi, cringing.

"Give me time, I'll think of something," Satan answered smugly.

Ragi shuddered as three evil-looking guards surrounded him.

"Take him away!" Satan ordered.

"No, wait, Sire! I have a plan—"

Satan cut him off. "Take him away!"

"Wait!" screamed Ragi. "I know how we can get the bomb!"

Satan raised his voice. "Take him—no. Wait! Speak up, Ragi, and make it good!"

Ragi talked long and earnestly.

The Devil finally nodded his head. "Might work. Sounds good."

"I'll go at once," Ragi said quickly.

"OH NO YOU WON'T!" roared the Devil. "I'm going! I can't take any chances. You might louse it up. But you can go with me."

Ragi heaved a sigh of relief and mopped his brow with a bit of asbestos.

"Tell me, Ragi, my boy," Satan said with a fatherly smile, "how did all of this business start?"

Ragi replied hesitantly: "Er—when I told you—that Percival the I—that's the new Emperor—had made his ultimatum eight days ago—"

"No! No! No!" Satan squawked. "You jerk! I mean, when did all this start up on the surface?"

"Oh!" answered Ragi. "About two weeks ago, Dr. Percival Horace Bullfinch resigned as head of the World Atomic Research Foundation. Then, eight days ago, he made a public address to the effect that he had made a bomb which would blow up the whole world. He gave them ten days to proclaim him first Emperor of the world and scientists have examined the formula and they say it's flawless. Psychologists are examining him to find out if he will really do it and if they decide that he will, then the world will have to give in."

"When do the psychologists render their decision?" Satan asked amusedly.

"Tomorrow at noon, Sire."

"Unholy mackerel!" Satan yelled. "We've got to get the lead out! Have the royal space ship rigged for action! Find about ten fairly competent demons and have them assemble here in the throne room in fifteen minutes!"

Ragi dashed toward the door. "They'll be here in FIVE minutes, your Lowness," he called out.

"Now you're cooking with plutonium!" Satan approved.

TWO days later, Satan and his demons were five million miles from the earth. The royal space ship was now speeding back to the earth, the powerful radio transmitter beaming messages ahead. Half a dozen monitoring stations on the earth picked up the feeble signals and word was quickly flashed to the palace of the newly-made Emperor of the World, Percival, the I. Within an hour, the message was confirmed by reports from all parts of the globe. Triangulation proved that the signal came from outer space in the direction of Venus. Then, the context of

the messages were released to the world.

"The inhabitants of Venus are sending a delegation to the earth. They will arrive in two days."

At the Emperor's orders, the people prepared the greatest reception this planet had ever seen.

Several million miles away, Satan paced back and forth in the huge ship. Outside, some of the crew members were painting the hull and covering the name "BRIMSTONE." Inside, others were redecorating. On doorways and at companionway intersections, neat signs in gold leaf were being applied.

The radio operator, bowing humbly, approached the Devil. "We finally received a reply to our messages, your Rottenness."

Satan lashed out with his foot and caught the radio operator on the shins. "How many times must I tell you dopes to call me Your Majesty? Now get this, once and for all! The first one that makes a break or lets the cat out of the bag will be busted right down to tending the furnaces!"

All the crew members mumbled, "Yes, Your Majesty."

Satan turned back to the radio operator. "Now what were you beating your gums about a minute ago?"

"One of the earth radio stations has managed to get a message back to us, Your Majesty," he said, still rubbing his maltreated shin. "Here's a transcript of it."

Satan read the message and chuckled nastily. "Ha!" he roared. "The jerks don't suspect a thing! They're going to roll out the welcome mat." He glanced at his crew. "But don't go getting any ideas! No tricks or rough stuff or there'll be the devil to pay!" Satan considered this last statement and then burst forth in uproarious laughter. Everyone joined him for it was unhealthy not to laugh at Satan's

jokes. He finally stopped enjoying his own wit and looked around the control room. "Where is Ragi?" he bellowed loudly.

"Here I am, ah—, Your Majesty. I'm bringing the stuff you ordered." The chief demon's voice issued from the companionway. He came into view, burdened down with a heavy crown, a scepter, and a long ermine cape.

Satan eyed the paraphernalia approvingly and tried it on for size. From somewhere under the ponderous crown and within the voluminous wrap, Satan's muffled voice gave instructions. "Ragi, you will be my advisor. Go and pick out the rest of my entourage so we can put up a good front. Have the tailors make them look like something out of this world! And get the lead out! We're landing in twelve hours!"

PPROMPTLY, twelve hours later, the quarter-mile long space ship discharged its occupants on the spacious landing field near the Emperor's palace. Waiting cars carried them swiftly to the gleaming plastic edifice of Percival the I, Emperor of the World. Satan's gorge rose when he saw all this glory bestowed on a mere mortal. Consequently when a man at the palace began to search the party from "Venus," it's not surprising that Satan kicked him violently in the stomach. The man went down but not before he had managed to deal Satan a crashing blow to the head with an automatic. There was a mad flurry on both sides during which both belligerents were forcibly restrained. Order had just been restored when a blaring of trumpets, slightly off key, brought everyone to attention. A hideously uniformed flunky bellowed for all the world to hear.

"Percival, the I, Emperor of all men! Keeper of the truth! Defender of the People! Dispenser of all justice!"

All of the men and part of Satan's retinue dropped to their knees and bowed. Satan, however, remained disdainfully aloof, looking down his hawk-like nose at the dumpy figure coming down the syntho-marble stairs.

Percival the I was even more of an elegant fop in his attire than was Satan himself. Satan started forward to greet him with outstretched hands but his feet shot out from under him and he spread-eagled on the floor with a resounding crash. He lay face up for one terrible moment, faint wisps of smoke issuing from his nostrils. Then he turned over on his side to observe Ragi still standing on the train of his long ermine wrap. The look of apologetic terror on Ragi's face seemed to please the Devil a trifle for he didn't annihilate the demon which would have been his usual procedure.

The frantic efforts of all the demons managed to get Satan on his feet again and brushed off. Ragi replaced the somewhat battered crown and then retrieved the scepter which had been flung half way across the large hall. Once again, Satan put on his synthetic smile and started toward the Emperor. Ragi galloped ahead and bowed low.

"Your Imperial Majesty," he said suavely. "May I present his Infernal, er—I mean His Eternal Highness Natas, Prince of Lleh, who comes to represent the sister world of the earth, Venus."

Satan glared at Ragi and trod heavily on his foot as he stepped forward to receive the outstretched hand of Percival the I.

"Bless my soul!" said Percival. "This is all such a surprise! Imagine! Visitors from another world! And they speak English!"

"We've wanted to come for years," Satan said grandiloquently, "but we waited until you had a unified govern-

ment. We've been able to hear your radio broadcasts for many years and from these we have learned the language. Due to some condition of your atmosphere, we've never been able to return the signals."

"Oh, yes, the ionosphere," mumbled Percival the I, "but come. Let's go into the Royal Library. I have just volumes of things I want to ask you."

SATAN graciously assented and allowed himself to be lead through a pair of huge carved doors. The royal attendants of both principals remained outside with the exception of Ragi and the man who had nearly brained the Devil.

Satan was at his best during the whole conversation. He supplied Percival the I with reams of fictitious data about Venus and other planets they had explored. Then he tactfully brought up the subject of interplanetary relations and trade.

"Of course the main reason for our visit to your planet is to arrange for commerce between our respective worlds."

"Naturally, naturally," mumbled Percival the I.

"I think you can see that it would be to our mutual advantage," the Devil continued, "yet there is one serious obstacle to be overcome."

"Oh? What might that be?" Percival the I asked.

"The bomb," Satan said regretfully. "You see, we couldn't send trade representatives because some accident might ensue and all our holdings would be lost."

Percival the I wrinkled his brow for a moment. "I can't see how there could be any accident. The bomb won't go off unless I wish it to. Believe me, Prince Natas, I wouldn't have harm come to you or your countrymen for anything!

You have my word! I won't set the bomb off without giving your subjects on this planet due time to leave. I could also deposit valuables with your government that would equal the value of your holdings on this planet."

"That's a true gentleman's statement," approved the Devil, "but unfortunately, not all of my subjects are gentlemen. No doubt, some of these low characters of my race would refuse to accept the word of any Emperor. Unhappily most of these low born persons are engaged in trading and finance."

Percival the I sighed. "I'm afraid, Prince, that we have reached an impasse. I can't relinquish the bomb or I'd have a revolution on my hands."

"Suppose we were to guarantee your power," suggested Satan craftily, "you wouldn't need the bomb."

"I'm afraid that wouldn't work either," insisted Percival the I. "If the people decided to revolt, it would start an interplanetary war. Venus would win, of course, but I'm afraid I would be one of the first casualties."

Satan's face grew a little redder. He wasn't accustomed to argument but he controlled himself well.

"Maybe we could impress the people of earth with our military might," he suggested.

"Maybe," echoed Percival the I, doubtfully.

Satan pushed the point further. "On second thought, it's a capital idea!" he grinned. "To start the program we could give you our space ship and could travel about the world. Then we could import weapons and let you demonstrate them to the people, Your Majesty."

"It doesn't sound very safe," said Percival the I hesitantly.

The Devil pressed on. "Of course it is! We'll be here on earth ourselves.

You don't think we'd take the chance on anything happening to you, do you?"

"Yes—yes, it sounds logical," Percival the I mused. "Even though I'm in the air, the bomb would still set off the disintegration. And I'll see that I don't go very far from the earth." He paused. "I agree!" he said with sudden emphasis. "If we impress them enough, I'll give up the bomb!"

"Excellent!" Satan exulted. "We shall celebrate by having a banquet in honor of Percival the I, Emperor of the World, aboard his royal space ship!"

PERCIVAL THE I giggled girlishly.

He was still tittering when Satan and Ragi swept out of the library.

"We go to prepare for your Majesty!" Satan called back melodramatically. He turned and crashed head on into the man with whom he had already had a minor dispute. Without thinking, Satan's ready foot shot out and collided with the unfortunate thug. The man's already keen dislike for the bogus Prince, impelled him to bash Satan across the head for the second time with his heavy automatic.

Satan's self control was marvelous. After making strangling noises in his throat, he got to his feet and faced Percival. "High spirited, isn't he?" he said with a forced laugh. "Oh well, I'm a bit hot tempered myself. Shall we let bygones be bygones?"

Ragi's mouth sagged open three inches. The Devil was actually shaking hands with the murderous guard.

Half an hour later, they were back in the space ship and Satan stomped back and forth. "Just wait till we get rid of this toad who calls himself Emperor of the World! I'll break that guard in half over my knee! I'll tear him up into hamburger! I'll, I'll —"

Satan spent the next hour telling

Ragi what he planned to do when they had disposed of Percival the I. Ragi was thankful that Satan had forgotten the episode of the cape.

Eventually Satan became his usual unpleasant self. Ragi helped him carefully dress for dinner in the fantastic clothing the ship's tailor had prepared. Satisfied finally with the preparations, the unholy pair went outside to await the coming of Percival the I.

Presently the Emperor drew up and amid a blaring fanfare of trumpets, marched up to the ship on a red carpet which two lackeys unrolled before him.

"Ah, your Majesty!" beamed the Devil. "Your magnificence leaves me dazzled!"

Percival the I giggled foolishly.

"May I present," announced Satan, "Your Majesty's space ship! Gift of the Prince of Lleh!"

Percival waddled up the gangplank followed by Satan and Ragi.

Satan looked around expectantly. "Didn't you bring your personal guard?" he asked.

"No," Percival the I answered naively. "He's waiting for me in the car. I don't think I'll be needing a guard."

"Ah, mutual trust," grinned Satan. "I can see a beautiful friendship blossoming between our worlds!" To Ragi he muttered, "This is too good to be true! I was afraid I was going to miss the privilege of torturing that wart. I've given instructions to everyone so tell them to scram. Now! All except the waiters. They can hit the road when I give the signal."

Ragi nodded his head and went on inside. Satan paused to point out the glittering gold leaf signs throughout the ship.

"Emperor's Grand Dining Salon, Emperor's lounge, Emperor's Bath, etc."

At each new sign, Percival the I burst

into new giggles. As they entered the grand ballroom, all of the Devil's henchmen bowed low. When Satan and Percival were seated, they took their places around the table.

"I trust you don't mind the presentation ceremony," Satan remarked to Percival. "It's an old tradition."

"Oh, not at all, not at all," bubbled Percival. "I received your note this afternoon. As I understand it, when the banquet is over, you and your party give me the key or whatever it is that locks this thing up and then you all file out."

"Exactly!" Satan commented gleefully. "You have a marvelous memory! Of course you understand our men will return in the morning to act as your crew until a new crew can be trained. But now, may I offer a toast?"

SATAN rose to his feet, holding his glass high. "To His Imperial Majesty, Percival the I, Emperor of the World! May his reign be long and happy! May nothing ever disturb his majestic tranquillity! May his voyage through life be long!"

Ragi had a fit of coughing during the while Satan, Percival the I and the others at the table drank deeply.

"Hmmm, good wine!" Percival said.

"Yes," chuckled Satan. "It is what we call, Michaelus Finnorum."

Ragi burst out coughing again as Percival drained his glass and set it down on the table. Then a dreamy look came into his eyes and he fell like a poled ox. Ragi set him back in his chair again as Satan laid out a neat game of solitaire on the table before Percival.

"I hope he knows how to play this!" roared Satan.

"He'll have time enough to learn!" Ragi howled.

The whole group filed out the port onto the field. In small groups they en-

tered waiting cars. Each car as it sped off the field, wobbled a little as the unsuspecting drivers were sandbagged and dragged out of their seats. Satan and Ragi were the last ones out of the ship. They paused at the port and heaved the gangplank inside. Just as Satan slammed the automatic locking hatch, Percival's personal guard came rushing up, gun drawn. He stopped, stupefied, as the great ship rose silently into the air. Satan lifted the dangling gun from the thug's hand and pointed it at him.

"What have youse done wit da boss!" the gunman demanded. "Where is he?" Satan pointed vaguely in the direction of the north star. "He went that way, as I recall!"

The man regarded Satan blankly.

"By the way," the Devil continued, "I owe you something." He stepped forward and brought the gun down with all his might on the gangster's unprotected skull. Unbelievably the man didn't drop dead but still stood.

"Ouch," he said. "That hoit!"

"Shall I kill him now, Your Filthiness?" Ragi asked.

"I don't know," Satan said thoughtfully, "maybe he can be of some use."

Ragi bowed his assent.

"What's your name?" Satan snarled.

"Louie, da Trigger," the man responded. "I mean, Count Louis Scaboni. Can't I work for ya?"

Satan drew a small black book from his pocket and consulted its pages carefully. He ran his fingers down a page and stopped at an entry. He straightened up with a broad, evil grin.

"Yes, you'll work for me all right! And WILL you work!" He turned. "Come on, Ragi, let's go. We'll be seeing him later!"

They drove off the field leaving the puzzled thug scratching his head.

"Well I'll be damned!" he muttered. "Youse can go to hell!"



M. CURIE FIRST DISCOVERED IN 1898 THAT RADIUM COMPOUNDS CONTINUALLY GIVE OFF A RADIOACTIVE EMANATION OR GAS. SOME CALL IT RADON; OTHERS PREFER NITON. IT SPREADS RAPIDLY WHEN AIR-BORNE, BUT CAN BE FROZEN BY LIQUID AIR!


RADIOACTIVITY

MEANT NOTHING TO FOLKS IN 1883. YET PEOPLE 3000 MILES DISTANT FROM KRAKATOA, NEAR JAVA, HEARD THE AIR-SPLITTING EXPLOSION WHICH BLASTED THE VOLCANO INTO A HOLE IN THE OCEAN FLOOR — 1000 FEET DEEP! IN THIS WELTER OF ATOMIC FURY, ROCKS ZOOMED 17 MILES SKYWARD, VAST WAVES ROLLED OFF CAPE HORN, AND AIR-BORNE DUST SWEEPED OVER SWEDEN, CAUSING BRILLIANT SUNSETS FOR YEARS.

EXCESS RADIOACTIVITY, PILING UP FOR CENTURIES, CAN MELT ROCKS TO LAVA. AND THINGS REALLY HAPPEN WHEN MOLTEN LAVA, UNDER HIGH PRESSURE, MIXES WITH SEA WATER!

EXPERIMENTING
WITH RADON INSTEAD OF WITH RADIUM IS LIKE SPENDING INTEREST-MONEY AND SAVING THE PRINCIPAL. FOR WHEN RADON IS PUMPED OFF RADIUM, ITS PARENT STARTS AT ONCE TO REPLACE THE LOST GAS. • RADIUM'S HALF-LIFE IS OVER 1600 YEARS; THAT OF RADON, A MERE 3.83 DAYS. BUT FROM RADON ARE DESCENDED THE OTHER RADIOACTIVE MEMBERS OF THE RADIUM GROUP.





TRAGEDY VISITED A NUMBER OF PIONEER PAINTERS OF RADIUM WATCH DIALS WHO HABITUALLY USED THEIR LIPS TO POINT UP THEIR BRUSHES. THE ALPHA RAYS OF RADON, IT SEEMS, CAN CAUSE DAMAGE TO LUNG TISSUE WHEN THE CONCENTRATED GAS IS BREATHED CONTINUOUSLY OVER A PERIOD OF TIME.



PIERRE CURIE, CO-DISCOVERER OF RADIUM, ONCE SUGGESTED THAT THE DECAY OF RADON BE USED TO TELL TIME BY! NEITHER MAN-MADE COLD, HEAT, NOR PRESSURE CAN CHANGE THIS UNIFORM RATE ONE 107A.



ONE

DECAY PRODUCT OF RADON IS SOLID RADIUM-A; ANOTHER IS HELIUM. ONE VOLUME OF RADON FURNISHES THREE VOLUMES OF HELIUM — THE INERT GAS USED SO EFFECTIVELY IN AMERICAN-BUILT AIRSHIPS.

RADON'S

FOUND ALMOST EVERYWHERE — IN RAIN, IN SPRINGS, IN SEA WATER. IT'S IN ROCKS, IN MINERALS AND IN VOLCANO PRODUCTS. YOU EVEN GET IT IN THE AIR YOU BREATHE!

ROMANCE OF THE ELEMENTS

By **ROD RUTH** and **GORDON MacLEAN**

THE STORY OF RADON, ALSO KNOWN AS NITON, ELEMENT NO. 86, SYMBOL Rn, ATOMIC WEIGHT 222, A CHEMICALLY INERT GAS.

THE HANDS OF ALI JINNAH

by DWIGHT V. SWAIN

**The Hindu merchant was glad
to sell the carved ivory hands —
and the evil that went with them**

CALCÚTTA'S sun blazed down upon them, dazzling bright, but Ruff's scowl stayed black as Tojo's heart. Savagely, he jerked his blue-piped infantryman's cap to an even more belligerent angle.

"Mark, there's times when I think the medics ought to reconnoiter the inside of that fat head of yours," he raged. "Buyin' junk jewelry in these stinkin' bazaars is bad enough. But when you let some greasy eight-ball in a dirty nightshirt put the evil eye on you for seventeen times what the stuff is worth, it makes me wonder if you hadn't ought to turn them stripes in on a Section Eight."

Sergeant Mark King managed a sheepish grin.

"Aw, lay off, Ruff," he pleaded. "What's a few bucks, when we're shipping home tomorrow?" He hesitated. Rubbed uneasily at the shrapnel wound's scar on his neck. "Besides, I had to get Kay something, didn't I? And Lord knows that jade brooch is little enough, what with this Graham Carson guy having an open field with her for the past two years."

"'Jade brooch'!" his buddy exploded. "Who the hell said anything about your blinkin' jade brooch? I'm

talkin' about them screwy hands, and you know it!"

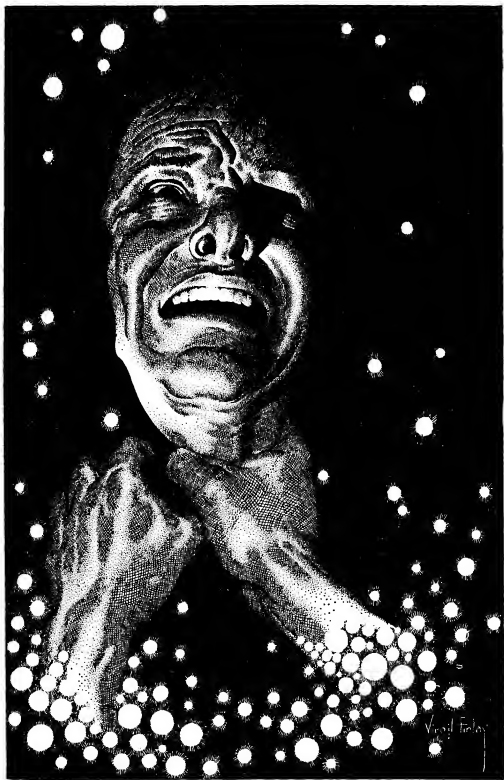
Mark's broad, good-natured face was growing unduly pink beneath its heavy tropic tan. He twisted uneasily again; made a pretense of tucking in his khaki shirt more smoothly.

"Well, you can't blame me for wanting to change my luck a little, can you?" he defended plaintively. "First, we get a bum break on rotation. Then I catch that slug in the chest, and the shrapnel in the back of my neck. Okay, so they decide to invalid me back to the States. Only now I find my girl's two-timing me, and there won't be any love and kisses waiting for me at the station after all. So when I get a chance to buy this luck charm cheap—"

"Charm, hell!" Ruff's snort was a sour masterpiece of sarcasm. "It's just a pair of dinky little carved ivory hands, and it's worth about two bits top, you dope. That Hindu faker can spout hot air from now till Christmas about 'em bein' spirit hands and servin' you like faithful slaves, but it still won't change the facts one bit. You got hooked, and that's all there is to it."

"But—"

"But, nothin'. You ain't really nuts enough to think the guy would have



They were cold and hard on his throat, and they seemed to come out of nowhere . . .

peddled the gimmick to you if it was worth anything, are you?" Ruff snorted again. "Hell, he dam' near choked tryin' to keep from laughin' right out loud when you laid the cash on the line—"

Two tiny hands they were, joined by a single thin link of silver that pierced the wrists: slender, delicate, exquisite as frost's traceries.

"They are old, these hands of Ali Jinnah, old beyond imagining," the merchant had intoned softly. "Observe their perfection: the veins, the nails, the skin." His voice sank to a sibilant whisper. "He who made them was a man of strange and terrible powers, *sahib*. A sorcerer, your wise ones would call him. . . ."

WITH words he wove a spell around the soldier, a spell that was a tale of magic, black and white, and of the adept, Ali Jinnah, and of the slave whose hands not even death could free.

And so, now, Sergeant Mark King, 114th Infantry, AUS, drifted through Calcutta's heat and filth and stench, twirling on his key-chain a weird talisman that was an Oriental wizard's master necromancy.

It was dark with the sudden, velvet blackness of an Indian night by the time the two Americans got back to their temporary quarters. In minutes Ruff had stripped off his sweat-soaked suntans and sprawled upon his cot.

But for Mark there was no rest. He turned up his tiny lamp. Stared bitterly at Kay's picture beside it.

The laughing red lips he had so treasured seemed now to sneer, the dark, sparkling eyes to mock him. The smooth cheeks—he could almost feel them against his own; but they were no longer his. Every rumped brown curl was like a knife-twist in his heart.

He dug her letters from his musette

bag for the thousandth time.

It was all there, in black and white: ". . . Did you ever meet Graham Carson, Mark? He's older than we are, of course . . . a gem expert at Orton's. He's been ever so kind to me since you went away . . ."

". . . Graham Carson took me to dinner at Allegheri's last night. It was terribly expensive, but the food was wonderful. We talked for hours . . ."

". . . I went dancing with Graham Carson again. It was a gorgeous night. We watched the moon rise, just like you and I used to do . . ."

Then, the brief, final note:

". . . and I hardly know what to tell you, Mark, for I do so hate to hurt you . . . but it wouldn't be fair to either of us for me to go on deceiving you . . . you've been away so long, and Graham, of course, is here; he's 4-F, you know. . . . At any rate, I'm not at all sure of how I feel toward you any more, so I'm returning your ring. Perhaps, when you come home, it will be different. . . ."

With a curse, Mark balled the scented paper, hurled it from him with all his might.

"Darn Graham Carson!" he raged aloud in helpless, impotent fury. "Darn all civilians! Here I am, stuck out here in this stinking hole for two long years, while that rat stays safe at home and makes love to my girl! Oh, if ever I get my hands on him for five minutes—" He sank back on his cot, coughing in a sudden spasm of pain from his chest wound. "Lord, how I wish I had a bottle! I'd get drunk as three stewed owls—"

He broke off in mid-sentence. Stared, slack-jawed, at a spot midway between Ruff's cot and the window.

There, swirling, eddying, curling, a strange, luminous mist was forming. Transparent, gossamer-like, it swayed

—a weird cloud, billowing and drifting at shoulder height.

Within it were the hands.

Smooth hands; slender hands. Cobra-like in their grace, they wove their sinuous way through the currents of glowing mist, strength rippling beneath their coppery skin.

Shock-stunned, Mark cringed before them. Watched them, in a paralysis of wonderment and fear, as they moved toward him.

Now, as they left their sheltering mist, another hammer-blow of horror struck him. The hands and wrists were solid, firm of flesh. But they ended, where the forearms should have begun, in a pale, indeterminate nebulosity!

They were hands without a body!

The sergeant's brain was spinning in a wild scramble of panic and incredulity, his tenuous grip on sanity slipping away. He tried to cry out, to fling himself from the cot in shameless flight, but his terror-knotted muscles would not respond.

SUDDENLY, then, the room was swimming before his eyes. As in a nightmare he felt himself falling, pitching through endless miles of bottomless space into unconsciousness' welcome black abyss. . . .

Ruff was shaking him vigorously when he came to his senses.

"Leggo that bottle, you dirty so-and-so!" his buddy was demanding. "What's the idea of holdin' out on me, huh?"

With a jolt, Mark realized that there was indeed a bottle clasped to his bosom. He held it out; stared at it, face sagging.

Not so, Ruff.

"Haig and Haig!" he whooped. "Where'd you get it, you old son-of-a-gun?" He snatched at the cork's seal.

Mark did not answer. Unconsciously

he rubbed at the scar of the shrapnel wound upon his neck. His mind was back-tracking, probing frantically at those bitter moments before the hands' appearance.

"Lord, how I wish I had a bottle!"

Those had been his very words. Then the hands had come.

Now, here was a bottle!

Ruff was making little gurgling noises.

"Ahhh!" he proclaimed with an air of immense satisfaction. "That's the real McCoy, that is." And then, gazing curiously at Mark: "Where *did* you get it, palsy? This stuff is worth its weight in three-day passes."

Mark reached for the bottle himself, took a long pull.

"Ruffy, you'd never believe me if I told you," he declared when he had finished.

"Well, have a stab at it, anyhow," the other urged. "A few more shots of this stuff'll make me believe anything."

They alternated on the bottle while Mark told his story. He was somewhat incoherent about it, but the main drift was clear enough. Ruff was nodding agreement with the regularity of a metronome by the time the tale was finished.

"Mark, boy, I take my hat off to you!" he grunted admiringly. "That Hindu eight-ball really did have luck for sale! You got the biggest bargain since whoever-the-bell-it-was bought New York from the Indians for a fistful of glass beads."

Mark grinned expansively, took another pull at the Scotch.

"You're telling me?" he chortled. "From here on out, you can call me Aladdin, Jr. All I have to do when I want anything is ask for it!" His eyes fell on Kay's picture; lit up with a wicked gleam. "What a home-coming it'll be, Ruff! Especially for a guy

named Graham Carson!"

"Bu' we'll shtill be buddies, won't we, Mark?" Ruff's voice was beginning to get a bit thick.

"Uh' course we'll be buddies. We'll alwaysh be buddies!" Mark's own words were none too clear. He began to sing off-key:

" . . . since you wen' away, my bud-d-d-y—"

Ruff joined in, with feeling.

The tender ballad finished, they each had another drink. Then Ruff led off:

"Mex-i-cal-i Ro-o-o-se—"

They sang it warmly, with plenty of emotion. Tha's what th' blinkin' bloody worl' needed, more good ol' emoshun—

Bang!

The door crashed open. A burly, tousle-headed individual, hairy arms akimbo, stood revealed. He wore slippers, a cotton undershirt, and a scowl like the wrath of God.

"What th' hell do you two gorillas think you're doin', singin' like a pair of warped calliopes at three o'clock in the mornin'?" he roared. "Here we give you a cadre room to yourselves because you're just out of the hospital, an' the best you can do is wake up everyone within a mile with your damn' yowlin'—"

Ruff met the glare head on.

"We got no time for no damn' charge-uh-quartersh!" he mumbled thickly. "Gwan! Get out o' here before we tie knotsh in your ugly neck!"

"Yeah, beat it!" Mark echoed enthusiastically. "Take your doll rags an' gwan home before y'get hurt!"

The CQ swelled up like a pouter pigeon with biceps.

"I'll teach you two tomcats to get drunk in quarters!" he bellowed. "You'll be in the guardhouse so long—"

"Get out!" Ruff roared.

"Now!"

Even as he shouted, Mark was hurl-

ing the now-almost-empty bottle. . . .

CHAPTER II

In Again, Out Again

"THERE are seven separate specifications against you men," the trial judge advocate stated. "They range all the way from resisting arrest and assaulting a noncommissioned officer in the performance of his duty to having liquor in your quarters." He eyed them sternly. "Have you anything to say in your own defense? Any mitigating circumstances which should be considered before you're brought to trial?"

Mark gulped hard. His broad face was scarlet with embarrassment. Beside him, a shame-faced Ruff twisted uneasily.

"I guess there isn't much we can say, sir," he confessed. "We didn't intend to get drunk, but you know how it is, sir, once you get started on a bottle—"

"Do I?" The JA did not seem at all favorably impressed.

The two enlisted men before him grew even redder. Mark rushed on:

"Anyhow, sir, after we'd had a few drinks, the rest of it—the singing, and the fight, and all—just seemed to come natural." He paused, drew a deep breath. A silent prayer was ringing in his heart. "We're scheduled to sail for home today, sir. . . . *I just wish we could get out of jail and onto that ship!*"

The officer's face did not relax. There were deep lines of irritation graven around his thin lips.

"I shall try to be fair," he declared, rising. "Your previous service, particularly your excellent combat records, warrants consideration. However, I feel that there has been altogether too much rowdyism and brawling in this

theater, and I have no intention of encouraging it by undue leniency."

Mark wasn't listening. His eyes were focused on a spot a little to one side of the officer: a spot where a thin cloud of mist was gathering. . . .

"Meanwhile, you may return to the guardhouse," the judge advocate ordered. He closed the folder on his desk in a gesture of dismissal. Strode grimly from the room.

A guard tugged at Mark's arm.

"Come on," he ordered. "Back to the stockade for you."

It was a furtively jubilant sergeant who turned to accompany him.

For back at the JA's desk, phantom hands already were shuffling through a mass of papers. . . .

Side by side, Ruff and Mark watched Calcutta's skyline fade away behind the troopship *Stanwood's* creamy, churning wake.

"I still don't get it," Ruff growled. "It's a cinch I sure didn't see nothin'."

Frowning a little, Mark nodded.

"As far as I can figure, these hands of mine must be invisible to everyone except the one who's bossing them," he explained, rubbing his shrapnel wound thoughtfully. "You didn't see them; we know darned well the guards didn't; yet I did. And the proof that I'm not just kidding is that the order to let us go came through before sailing time."

"Well, all I got to say is—"

An interruption, in the form of a paw the size of a medium ponton clamping onto his shoulder, tore Mark's attention away.

"Come on, wise guy!" the rumbling voice of the ham's owner commanded. "You got a date with the captain."

The captain appeared to be in a bad mood. He glared at the two soldiers. Waved a radiogram before them.

"You didn't think you could get away with forging release papers, did you?"

he bellowed menacingly.

THE two buddies exchanged brief, horror-stricken glances.

"Well, take it from me, it wasn't smart," the ship's master continued. "You spend the rest of this voyage in irons, and when we come Stateside, I'm turning you over to the provost marshal."

Shrouded in a black fog of gloom, the pair were led away to the brig.

"Oh, them hands were a bargain!" Ruff snarled savagely when they were alone. "They got us out of trouble, all right. Only they got us in a hell of a lot worse jam in doin' it."

Mark jumped as if prodded by a Jap bayonet.

"That's it!"

"That's what?"

"Don't you see?" Mark waved his arms wildly. "It explains why that Hindu was so anxious to sell the hands—"

"All right, all right." Ruff glared him to a halt. "You got an idea. Only you're way ahead of me. Now, start over again, only slow and easy-like, so I can figure it out, too."

Mark fumbled for a place to begin.

"One thing's certain," he said at last. "The hands are all the Hindu claimed. They serve you like faithful servants. They grant your wishes. They give you the things you want. Right?"

"Right. Only—"

"Only there's a catch to it. You told me right after I bought 'em that they were too good to be true, remember? You said that the Hindu nearly laughed in my face when I laid down my money."

Ruffed nodded vigorously.

"And I wasn't just kidding," he affirmed. "I never seen such a smirk in my life—"

"Of course. And the reason he snick-

ered was because of the catch. He knew about it, and we didn't."

"Sure. Only what's the gag? I still don't get it."

"The catch," Mark answered slowly, "is that those hands picked up a dose of reverse English somewhere along the line. They grant your wishes, yes. But when they do it, they somehow always manage to screw up the works some way, so that you end up in a jam that's worse than the one you started with. That's why the Hindu was so anxious to peddle 'em."

"Yeah. I see what you mean." Ruff pondered. "Like when you wished you had a bottle. The hands got one for you. And it was a good bottle, too. Only it worked out that we got drunk on it and landed in the stockade."

"Exactly." It was Mark's turn to nod. "The same way, I wished that we could get out of jail and onto the ship for home."

"So here we are," a dour Ruff concurred. "We're on the ship for home—and in the brig."

"Sure. And that's the way it'd always be, certain as sunrise." Mark considered carefully. "I'll even bet that if I made a wish—and I'm not going to do it—" (this last with emphasis) "we'd get out of here. Only it'd probably be because a Jap torpedo hit this old hooker amidship and blew us right through the side."

Ruff stared unhappily at the floor. "You called it right, buddy," he agreed. "Them hands bring luck—but it's all bad." Then, after a moment's further consideration: "Take my advice, Mark, and throw the darn things out the porthole while you got a chance."

Mark meditated.

"No," he decided finally, "I don't think that's such a hot idea."

Ruff stared at him, aghast.

"Are you nuts, fella?" he demanded. "If you hang onto them darn mitts much longer, we'll end up stretchin' rope sure. Ditch 'em, now, before they get us in dutch any worse than we are already."

"Nope." Mark was adamant. His eyes narrowed and he took on an air of concentration. "I've still got a few ideas," he explained mysteriously. "Maybe we can put those hands to some good use yet."

"All that believe that can go stand in a corner with their thumbs up their noses," his buddy snorted. "I say you're Section Eight bait if you keep 'em."

BUT keep them Mark did. The talisman still swung from his keychain as, shackled together, he and Ruff stumbled down the gang-plank.

The judge advocate who questioned them this time was even more grim than his CBI predecessor. He addressed himself to Mark:

"Talk fast, sergeant!" he commanded curtly. "You're in mighty hot water. Why did you forge those release papers?"

Mark stood rigidly at attention.

"We didn't forge them, sir!" he answered. "We can prove it, too. We were in custody every minute, and the guards can testify that they didn't give us the slightest chance to touch a thing"

"Then who did? And why?" The JA's bony fingers flicked at a paper that lay before him. "The officer who examined you states specifically in this radiogram that you were let go on forged papers."

Mark swallowed hard.

"Sir, I don't expect you to believe me when I tell you this," he declared, "but those papers were forged by the hands of a sorcerer's slave who died

Lord only knows how many hundred years ago!"

"What?"

"I said, sir, that they were forged by a scorcercer's slave—"

The judge advocate's fist came down with a bang.

"That's enough, sergeant. You're in the wrong place." He glared at the two miscreants. "Before this goes any further, I'm going to send you over to the hospital for a thorough psychiatric examination."

The psychiatrist turned out to be a pleasant young captain in the Medical Corps. He called Mark in first.

"I think you'd better start from the beginning, sergeant," he suggested sympathetically, proffering a cigarette. "Just sit down, relax, and tell me in your own words exactly what you believe happened to you."

Mark refused the smoke.

"Well, sir, it all began in a bazaar back in Calcutta," he explained nervously. "The proprietor was a Hindu. He sold me a charm—" Carefully and in detail he told his story, omitting nothing.

"No one knows that it all sounds mighty screwy better than I do, sir," he concluded earnestly at long last. "I can't help that, though. It's the truth. The whole truth, every word of it."

The psychiatrist eyed Mark with interest. Professional interest. His expression showed clearly that he already was prepared to sign and seal the necessary commitment papers.

"I want to give you every break I can, sergeant," he announced finally. "I'm frank to admit that psychiatry does not admit of the type of phenomenon you describe. Nevertheless it obviously is real to you, and it's only fair that I give you a chance to prove your point."

"Thank you, sir."

"You admit that it's fair, then, to ask for proof?"

Mark nodded instant agreement, though the palms of his hands were wet with sweat.

"Oh, yes, sir. I expected you to ask it, sir."

The officer pondered for a moment.

"Right now? he asked at least.

"Sure thing, sir." Mark removed the tiny talismen from his key chain and passed it across the desk. "Take 'em, sir. They're yours. Just make any wish you want to."

"So these are the root of all the trouble." The doctor examined the hands with interest. "Well, we'll give them an easy job."

LAYING down his fountain pen, he raised one hand dramatically.

"I wish to know whether this sergeant before me is telling the truth. Is it correct that his troubles have been caused, directly or otherwise, by the hands of Ali Jinnah?"

Silence settled over the room, silence unbroken save by the sound of the two men's breathing.

Tensely, Mark waited.

Suddenly the doctor whitened. With strange intensity he stared across his desk. His mouth opened to speak, but no sound came.

There was the faintest of rustlings . . . a rustling as of the brush of phantom fingers over some smooth surface. The psychiatrist's knuckles went white.

As if by magic the fountain pen he had just laid down rose from the desk. A scratch pad shifted position.

The pen's point touched the paper. Moved, in queer, brush-like strokes. Formed words in a peculiar script, all angles, that somehow resembled the ideographs of some forgotten Oriental tongue.

Taut-muscle, Mark watched the

message unfold:

The sergeant speaks the truth.

The pen descended once again to its place upon the desk.

For a long moment the psychiatrist stared at the sheet before him. Then, with a trembling hand, he thrust the talisman back across the desk.

"Take it!" he choked. "My spirit of scientific inquiry doesn't go this far."

He reached for the phone. Dialed a number.

"Judge Advocate's office? This is Captain Sant. I've just interviewed those two enlisted men you referred to me this morning, Major. They're both suffering dangerous complications of combat fatigue. . . . Yes, I'm certain. I advise that you forget the whole thing; to prosecute them would be both unjust and useless. They're on the verge of complete crack-up. . . .

"Disposition? Oh, I'm recommending that they be given immediate furloughs. They need relaxation, freedom from anything even remotely resembling military discipline—a chance to readjust to normality, as it were. . . . Yes, I'll see that the papers get over to you at once, Major. . . ."

Two days later Captain Sant collapsed in a complete nervous breakdown. He babbled incessantly of phantom hands. . . .

CHAPTER III

Handfuls of Trouble

BUDS were bursting in the little park across from the station. Bright new tufts of grass sprinkled the drab winter lawns with sparkling green.

Mark drew the air deep into his lungs, savored spring's earthy richness.

"Home again!" he choked.

Beside him, Ruff nodded.

"You said it, chum: home." He shook his head, sighed huskily. "How many times did we figure we'd never see it again no more, Mark?" A pause. "Sure you won't stay over at my place? We got plenty of room."

"No, thanks." Mark was definite. "It'll be better if I just get a hotel room. I'd feel funny, hornning in on your welcome, what with my folks gone, and all. . . ." A wicked little glint came into his eyes. "Besides, I've got some plans."

"Graham Carson, huh?" Ruff slapped him on the shoulder. "Well, have yourself a time, fella. Only just remember that they still hang a guy for murder in this state. Also"—he jerked his head toward the talisman that hung on his buddy's key-chain—"don't go forgettin' yourself and makin' a bunch of wishes."

Mark grinned, but there was an unpleasant hardness about the corners of his mouth.

"Don't worry, Ruff," he advised. "I think I can keep out of trouble. And as for the hands, now that I'm home there's no more wishes I need to make."

But finding a room in a war-boomed town, Mark discovered, was not so easy as he had imagined. He ended up on a side street, in an ill-kempt hostelry where a shirt-sleeved clerk lounged, feet on desk, eyeing a smirking, full-bosomed blonde who hitched her skirt even higher above her knees when Mark came through the lobby.

"Home!" he snorted, surveying the grimy, jaundice-papered air-shaft room he had drawn. "I think I'll go back to Burma."

Still, it would serve his purpose: a headquarters, a place to clean up, a command post from which he could lay his plans for a new assault on Kay's heart. He wondered if he had a chance. . . .

He was still wondering when, late that afternoon, he strode up Kay's front walk. On the porch he paused. Straightened his tie, adjusted the angle of his cap, patted once again the pocket where the jade brooch reposed. Then, deliberately, he rang the bell.

'Kay herself opened the door.

Mark caught his breath.

She was even lovelier than he had dreamed, lovelier than any picture ever could portray: the soft brown hair that framed the perfect oval of her face, the dark, glowing eyes, the warm red lips, the trim figure, its youthful curves all slim perfection in the blue of the simple dress she wore—

"Kay!"

"Mark!"

She caught his hands, pulled him inside.

"Oh, Mark—"

"Long time no see, kid."

Even as he said it, he knew it was inane. But she didn't seem to notice.

For a long moment they stood there, staring into each others' eyes, saying nothing more.

At last he broke the silence, reached into his pocket for the jade brooch.

"I brought you something, Kay."

B-b-r-r-r-i-i-n-g!

It was the doorbell.

"Oh—" Kay shook off her annoyance at the interruption in a swish of brown curls. "I'm sorry, dear. . . ."

THE man outside was as tall and thin as Mark was solid, his long face sharply chiseled with that arrogance some mistake for breeding. He smoothed his blondly silken waves of neat-trimmed hair as he entered. Pulled the girl to him in a little gesture of intimacy.

"I got off early, Kay. Just thought I'd drop by."

Kay's cheeks glowed a trifle pinker.

A flicker of embarrassment crossed her lovely face.

"Mark . . . I've written you about Graham Carson—"

The man turned, swept Mark with a coolly insolent glance. He made no effort to extend his hand.

"Oh, so the conquering hero's returned, eh?" He flicked the double-row of ribbons that lined the sergeant's left breast. "Quite a collection you have there."

The way he said it made it an insult.

Before Mark could retort, Carson's attention was back with the girl.

"You were admiring this in the window the other night, darling. Remember?" He held out a glittering, emerald-splattered bracelet. "I picked it up for you today."

"Oh!" Kay's voice caught. "Graham, it's beautiful!"

Then, recalling:

"Mark, you said you'd brought me something, too. . . ."

"Oh, forget it." Mark mumbled the words, his face aflame: a cheap jade brooch, set in silver—how could he let her compare it with Carson's superbly-fashioned bracelet?

"I will *not* forget it. Let me see it."

The worst of it was, she probably thought she was being nice by insisting, Mark realized miserably. He cursed beneath his breath.

"Oh, what I wouldn't give to show up that skunk!" he muttered. "How I wish I had something that would put his damn' bracelet so far in the shade that—"

He stopped short, aghast, as the awful enormity of what he had done dawned upon him.

"Come on, now, Mark," Kay coaxed. "Don't be bashful. Show it to me."

With trembling fingers Mark dug into his pocket. Pulled out the tissue-wrapped object that reposed there.

Kay opened it eagerly, then gasped aloud.

"Mark!"

Her soldier breathed a silent prayer before he let his gaze fall. The next instant he, himself, was gasping.

Blinding brilliance met his eyes, brilliance from a thousand sparkling facets that gleamed, rainbow hued, in a single, breath-taking pattern. It was a brooch, yes; but what a brooch!

Even Carson whistled low. He lifted the piece from Kay's hand, inspected it critically.

"They must be paying the Army well these days, King," he commented caustically at last, returning the brooch to Kay. "Plenty of men work a lifetime without earning the price of that item. In fact"—his thin lips curled in a sneer—, "if we didn't know you were just home from the wars, I'd be inclined to notify the police that The Creeper had at last been found."

"The Creeper?"

Kay laughed nervously.

"Don't pay any attention to him, Mark; he's just jealous."

But Carson answered the question:

"The Creeper is our most noted burglar of the moment, King. He specializes in gems—tasty little trinkets like that one."

"I figured it was something like that." Mark's voice was unnaturally calm. Hard-jawed, eyes flashing cold fire, he moved a step closer to his rival. Took his stand, feet planted wide apart, hands on hips. "Well, I don't like cheap, second-rate chisellers suggesting that I spend my spare time swiping jewels. Especially if the guy who's doing the talking has been safe at home, stealing my girl, while I'm off in the CBI fighting a war for him."

The contemptuous sneer never left Graham Carson's thin lips.

"Quite a mouth-fighter, aren't you?"

he taunted. "No doubt you devastated the Japs."

A red fog of fury swept Mark's reason aside. Savagely, with all his might, he swung.

Carson barely seemed to move. With a boxer's skill, he side-stepped as Mark lunged wildly forward. Drove a hard right below the sergeant's heart.

The soldier's chest-wound seemed to explode in a flaming ball of pain. Blind with agony, he staggered back.

IT WAS Carson's moment. His eyes narrowed. Coolly, calculatingly, his foot slashed up in a vicious kick. Found its mark deep in Mark's groin.

Retching, clawing, Mark pitched to the floor. Kay's words drifted to him through a delirium of screaming nerves.

"Get out!" she was crying. "Get out! I should have known you could never understand. You're just an animal—a big, clumsy beast that wants to break things with its fists when it can't have its way—"

Dazed, unbelieving, helpless with pain and rage, Mark heard her out. Watched, in an agony of incredulity, as Carson drew her to him.

"He's not worth your tears, my dear," he heard the gem expert say. "Forget him. Now that I've taught him a lesson, I doubt that he'll try to bother you further—"

Mark lurched to his feet.

"Honey—" he mumbled.

"Get out!" Kay sobbed. "I never want to see you again!"

His face like stone, he staggered from the room. . . .

He was in his shabby rookery downtown, staring out dull-eyed across the airshaft, when the police came.

"Sergeant Mark King?" the slim hard-faced detective in charge demanded.

Mark nodded.

The other's cold eyes passed over the ribbons on the soldier's blouse: the Silver Star, the Purple Heart, the battle stars.

"I'm sorry to have to do this, young fellow," he said, "but I'm under orders to run you in."

Again Mark nodded.

"What's the charge?" he asked, reaching for his blue-piped cap.

"Jewel theft." The detective shook his head. "It wasn't smart, sergeant. Not smart at all. That brooch is a display piece. Every big dealer in town knows it."

"So Carson, being gem expert at Orton's, made it a point to turn me in." Mark jammed on the cap. "All right. Let's go."

The detective eyed him curiously.

"How'd you work it, kid?" he inquired. "We still haven't been able to figure out the angle."

Mark twirled his key-chain, eyes fixed on the tiny ivory hands that spun at its end.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," he answered bitterly. "Come on. I'm ready."

There were a lot of formalities to be observed in arresting a man for anything so important as jewel theft, he learned. At last, however—booked, fingerprinted, photographed, cross-examined—he was led to a cell. He surveyed its bleak interior dourly.

"Well, I'll get some rest out of this furlough, anyhow," he observed with grim humor, settling himself on the strap-iron cot in the corner.

But a jailer awakened him a little before midnight.

"On your way!" the man commanded, swinging wide the door. "You're sprung!"

Mark eyed him unbelievably.

"I'm in no mood for kidding," he retorted, making no move to arise.

"This isn't Christmas, and besides, I quit believing in Santa Claus a long time back."

The jailer shrugged.

"It's up to you. But you're sprung, if you want to leave. You know the right people, and they've fixed everything."

At the booking desk Mark found out who the right people were.

"Ruffy!"

RUFF grinned broadly, jerked a stubby thumb over his shoulder toward one of the fattest men Mark had ever seen.

"Shake hands with my Uncle Tom Rafferty, chum," he invited. "Uncle Tom's the biggest bail bondsman in this burg."

The fat man thrust out a pudgy paw.

"Pleased t'meetcha, sarge. When th' boy told me th' fellow who'd saved his neck from them dirty Japs was in th' clink here, y'can bet I stirred my stumps, but fast!"

"We'd of got you out sooner, only I didn't know they'd pinched you till the late editions hit the street," Ruff added apologetically. Then, scowling: "Talk about your dirty deals! I saw through it in two shakes. You can bet that Kay dame ain't gonna forget the piece of mind I gave her over the phone for a good long time!"

Mark shrugged.

"It isn't her fault," he told his friend. "I played the thing like a sap right from the start. Between Carson and the hands, I didn't have a chance."

"The hands?"

"Like a damn' fool, I made a wish, so they switched brooches on me. Then I started throwing punches at Carson. It turned out he knew how to box. He let me have it right under the heart—"

"Under your heart? Good Lord, fel-

la, are you still alive? You sure it didn't open up that wound?"

"Guess not. Anyhow, I'm still walking." Mark forced a death's-head grin. "Well, I'm pretty tired, so I guess I'd better get back to my room. Carson worked me over on the thorough side."

Ruff nodded understandingly, clapped him on the shoulder.

"Sure thing, Mark. An' don't worry. Uncle Tom an' me'll figure a way to beat this rap for you when it comes to trial. An' to fix that Carson scum, too—"

"Not that." Eyes smouldering, Mark cut him short. "I've got my own plans on that score."

"Hey, now—"

Ruff's alarm forced a chuckle even from Mark.

"Oh, don't worry. I'm not figuring anything messy or violent. Not even illegal. But I think I've got a little scheme that'll make him wish he'd never been born."

"Well, if you're sure . . ." Ruff sounded doubtful. "Okay, then—"

The unkempt lobby was deserted now. The night clerk, badly in need of a shave, slumped over the desk asleep. Not bothering to waken him, Mark retrieved his key and rode the rickety automatic elevator upstairs.

In his room, he hesitated. Every bone and muscle ached. He longed for sleep's solace. Yet as he fumbled, wooden-fingered, at the buttons of his shirt, he knew there could be no rest for him.

For there was a vision still to haunt him: the vision of the girl he loved, and knew he would always love, come what may. Let him close his eyes for but a second and she was there before him, dark eyes mocking, red lips taunting. . . .

He flung himself onto the bed in helpless rage.

"Why can't I have her?" he mumbled brokenly. "I love her so much, so damn' much. . . ." He punched at the pillow, buried his face in its smothering depths. "Or why can't I at least forget her?" Deeper and deeper he wallowed into despond's mire, hanging drunkenly in that shadowed half-world between wakefulness and sleep. "Oh, Lord, I wish I had a girl—any girl! I'm so damn' lonely. . . ."

He must have drifted off for a few moments, then, for the sound of the knock at his door brought him upright in bed with a jolt. Bleary-eyed, sodden with sleep, he answered:

"Come in."

The door opened and a shadowy figure slipped wordlessly inside. There was a furtiveness about it all, a conspiratorial air that set Mark's nerves a-tingling. His fingers sought the switch of the night lamp beside his bed.

Before him stood a girl.

SENSUOUS crimson lips curved in a half-smile as the light came on. Wise eyes met his, dark pools of sultry promise set beneath a lace of lashes.

"I got your note, soldier." Her voice was huskily intimate. Deft hands swept back the rippling auburn of her hair. Smoothed the black chiffon negligee that draped her long-limbed body in studied provocation, accentuating rather than concealing the full breasts' swell, the white thighs' satin sleekness. "You won't be sorry, I promise you."

"My note? What are you talking about?"

Her low laugh mocked him.

"Don't be bashful, soldier. I know you're lonely." She moved toward him, held out a folded slip of paper. "See? I brought it with me."

Mark's blunt fingers trembled as he unfolded it. The girl slid onto the bed close beside him, cool fingers caressing.

The faint musk of her perfume assailed his nostrils, sent his blood-pressure skyrocketing.

Dry-lipped, he read:

"There's a lonely soldier in Room 419. Why don't you pay him a visit?"

He stared at it in mute, unhappy fascination. But it was the calligraphy, not the words, that held him—

Queer it was . . . a peculiar script, all angles, that somehow resembled the ideographs of some forgotten Oriental tongue. . . .

Words were coming back to him—words he had spoken in a daze of bitterness and desperation:

Oh, Lord, I wish I had a girl—any girl!

"Those damned hands!" he exploded.

The head of the girl beside him was nestled on his shoulder, her soft body warm against his own. The cool fingers touched his cheek.

"Relax, soldier," she whispered. "I know how it is—"

He shoved her aside with an oath.

Cat-like, she was on her feet, eyes flashing fire.

"What's the matter with you?" she spat. "Don't you think I'm good enough for you?" Her fingers fumbled at the negligee's sash. "Here! Look! What more do you want?"

Wantonly, she swept it open in an angry swirl of black chiffon. Stood exposed before him, a study in lush curves and soft white flesh.

As if it were a signal, the door crashed open.

Aghast, Mark spun about.

There, framed in the doorway, stood the epitome, the literal embodiment, of outraged femininity.

"Kay!"

He exploded the name in a horror-stricken gasp. Beside him, the young lady of the evening calmly shrouded

her charms within the negligee.

Blank bewilderment, disbelief, incredulity—tumultuously jumbled, they swept Kay's face, only to go down before an overwhelming inner fury, while behind her a visage which Mark recognized as her father's twisted in a knowing leer.

"Oh—!" she choked. "Oh, you—you beast!" Tears of helpless rage streamed down her flaming cheeks. "To think that I came here sorry for you—repentant—ready to apologize—"

With a monumental effort, she mastered her emotion, stiffened the quivering lips.

"So this is how a man relieves combat fatigue!" Loathing, contempt, dripped from every word. Her blazing eyes swept imperiously from Mark to the girl, and back again. "Please forgive me for interrupting such a pleasant evening, Sergeant King!"

Skirts swishing, high heels clicking, trim figure proudly erect, she was gone. Her father followed in her wake, one eye closed in a smirking, lecherous wink as he departed.

CHAPTER IV

A Gift for Mr. Carson

MORNING and Ruff found a haggard, red-eyed Mark still pacing the floor. He scarcely glanced up as his friend entered the room.

"Hey, what's this, buddy?" Ruff was solicitous. "You look like you'd spent a night with the banshees and a bottle of wood alcohol. Is anything wrong?"

"Wrong?" Mark exploded savagely. "Is anything wrong? Are you crazy? Can't you see I'm on top of the world—"

Ruff's shove sent him reeling into a chair.

"Give, mister. You've blown your

top all over the ceiling. Now come back down to earth and tell Uncle Ruff what the score it."

In bitter detail Mark poured forth his story.

"It's a masterpiece!" he fumed. "If I'd spent six months figuring out a scheme to put myself behind the eight-ball, I could never have done half so good a job of screwing up the works."

His friend's bullet head wagged sadly.

"Buddy, you sure hit the jackpot," he agreed.

"And the hell of it is that there's not one darn thing I can do to straighten things out!" raged Mark. "Last night, Kay came here ready to forgive and forget. From there, I'd have at least had a chance to give that rat Carson a run for his money. Now it's finished. Done."

He threw himself on the rumpled bed in a paroxysm of despair.

But Ruff was scowling at the floor in deep concentration.

"It's them hands that did it all. Right?" he demanded at last.

Mark grunted bitter affirmation.

"Sure. They did it. So what?"

"Okay. It's their fault. You're in the clear."

"And a hell of a lot of good it'll do me."

Ruff disregarded him.

"Now: how did we get out of them other jams the hands screwed us into?"

"Why, we told that psychiatrist all about it, and then proved it—" Mark stopped short, sudden hope dawning in his bloodshot eyes. "Hey! You don't mean—?"

"Sure I do. Why not?" Ruff shrugged. "It's a lead-pipe cinch you can't be any worse off, and there's always a chance it'll work." He thumped a heavy fist upon his knee. "You go see Kay, fella. Make her listen—tie

her down if you have to. Then prove that you're tellin' the truth."

Already Mark was grabbing for his shaving brush and razor.

"Ruff, you've hit it!" he exclaimed jubilantly. "I'll try it if it kills me!"

Kay was home when Mark arrived. She did her best to slam the door in his face.

"Not so fast!" He shoved his heavy GI shoe between door and jamb. "There's some things I've got to say to you, young lady!"

With a single heave, he was inside.

But someone else was inside too—an unpleasant someone who answered to the name of Graham Carson. Two burly characters with 'cop' written all over them flanked his rival.

"I thought you'd try something like this, my fine fellow!" Carson gloated. "That's why I took these precautions. I'll not have Kay annoyed further by an loud-mouthed lecher in uniform—"

"Why, you—!" Mark's fists were knotting as he lunged.

"Easy, there!" growled one of the policemen. His foot intercepted Mark in a skilful trip, sent the solder sprawling on the floor. Then, pouncing like vultures, he and his partner pinioned the fallen sergeant's arms.

"Let go of me!" Mark raged. "I'll take on all of you—"

HIS captors' response was to augment their grip with handcuffs.

"I think we'd better take him along and let him cool off in the drunk tank, Mr. Carson," the man on his right suggested respectfully. "The mood he's in now, he might try anything."

The gem expert nodded agreement.

"You're quite right, officer. He's definitely dangerous. Certainly not to be allowed to run at large."

"Kay!" Mark appealed frantically, struggling in vain to free himself. "Are

you going to let them do this to me? Won't you even give me a chance to tell my side of it all?"

She would not meet his eyes. The red lips were pressed tight together.

"Pleasant dreams!" Graham Carson taunted under his breath as they dragged the soldier away.

But Mark's dreams were anything save pleasant. Shrouded in a dark aura of gloom, he sprawled once again on a strap-iron cot in the city jail and meditated on the murkier aspects of life's tragedy.

"Hey, soljer, are you shtiff, huh?" a hiccuppy fellow-inmate interrupted his bleak reverie. "You don't look drunk. Why don't they le-chuh out, huh?"

Mark ignored him. But the drunk refused to be quelled.

"They wouldn't never keep *me* in no jail 'f I washn' drunk!" he declared darkly. "Y'know what I'd do?" He paused for a spasm of hiccoughs. "I'd 'scape, tha's what I'd do. Crash right outa this ol' jail." Bleary-eyed, he peered at Mark. "Why don't you 'scape, huh?"

It was a thought, at that, Mark decided. And then, sinking back into apathy: but to what avail? As things stood, he'd be let out in a day or so anyhow. . . .

"Mark King!" sang out a jailer. "Sergeant Mark King!"

Mark raised up on his cot.

"What do you want?" he demanded irritably.

"Come on out here," the jailer ordered. "Gotta take you to court. Preliminary arraignment on a jewel theft charge—"

Mark jolted back. The jewel theft charge! That brooch for Kay! He'd forgotten all about it!

"Hurry up! I ain't got all day, even if you have."

Slowly, Mark got to his feet, his

brain a kaleidoscopic whirl of conflicts.

That darn jewel theft charge! He didn't have the chance of a snowball in hell of beating it. Not even the smell of an alibi as to how the brooch had come into his possession. . . .

"Hurry up!" the jailer repeated.

. . . And those thrice-cursed hands of Ali Jinnah! He could never convince a court of law that they were responsible. . . .

The jailer hurried him along down the barren, cell-lined corridor.

"Judge Seversky's presidin'," the man fumed. "He don't like to be kept waitin'."

A heavy steel door loomed ahead. The jailer pressed a button set in the wall beside it, and somewhere beyond a buzzer rang.

For a moment they waited.

Suddenly Mark's mind was made up. The hands had gotten him into this. Now they'd have to get him out. A bleak, humorless smile crooked his lips. Thoughtfully he swung his key-chain—a key chain at whose end dangled the ageless hands of a phantom slave. . . . The door swung open.

A UNIFORMED policeman, complete with gun and blackjack, took over. He clamped handcuffs and a come-along on Mark with the skill of long practice and led the soldier out into another hall. An arrow, pointing left, was labeled *Criminal Courts*.

They passed an intersecting corridor. Mark glanced down it. Caught a glimpse of open doors and sun-spattered street.

The policeman's left hand twisted the come-along tighter. His right dropped to the butt of the Smith & Wesson .38 on his hip.

"Don't try it, soldier," he advised. "You wouldn't have a chance."

Mark forced a grimace that was supposed to pass for a grin.

"Well, you can't blame a guy for dreaming, can you?" he asked, struggling desperately to keep the tension from his voice. *"What with the jam I'm in, I only wish I could escape."*

The cop laughed without humor, gave the come-along another quarter-turn.

The pressure sent icy waves of pain racing through Mark's nervous system, but he hardly noticed it.

Before his very eyes the hands were forming.

Like ghosts they came, in their shimmering mist—sinister, hovering, dead—ly—

Then, as lightning strikes, they moved: one in a vicious blow that paralyzed the hand with which the policeman was holding the come-along's grip; the other seizing an ankle, spilling him headlong to the marble floor with stunning force.

Mark caught an instant's glimpse of nebulous fingers that gripped a key. The handcuffs fell away.

But he had no time to linger. A well-placed kick sent the policeman's gun spinning down the hall, and Mark was sprinting for the street and freedom. . . .

A drifting cloud obscured the moon. Mark took advantage of the cover to duck hastily across the street. Deep in an alley's shadows, he paused, glanced at his watch: it was only eight p.m. Then, calculatingly, he surveyed the apartment house before him.

"So this is where he lives!" he muttered half-aloud. "Well, Mister Graham Carson, here comes trouble, on the double!"

Straightening his blouse, he strode boldly out into the light and up the steps.

Graham Carson, he learned from the

mailboxes, lived in apartment 3B.

Mark promptly pressed the button for apartment 5A.

A woman's voice echoed in the speaking tube.

"Who is it?" she demanded.

Mark again surveyed the mailboxes. Selected the name that appeared on 4A's.

"Registered special delivery for Henry Ragland," he sing-songed in a masked voice.

"He's in 4A. This is 5A." The woman sounded irritable. Then: "Here. I'll let you in."

The electric latch clicked back. Mark stepped inside and moved cautiously up the stairs.

Carson's apartment, 3B, was at the back of the building and to the right of the central hall. The window at the end of the hall, Mark discovered upon raising it, led onto a fire escape that also served apartment 3B. In seconds he was crouched outside Carson's window.

The apartment proved to be pitch-black within.

"Perfect!" Mark chuckled grimly. Now that the first flush of escape's excitement had worn off, he was strangely calm, his nerves granite-steady. He muscled up the window, stepped across the sill into the darkened room. "Now to present my little gift!"

By the light of a pocket flash, Mark inspected Carson's quarters. They consisted, he discovered, of a large living room with a side alcove that served as a bedroom. Half-open doors revealed a kitchenette and bath. The furnishings were rich to the point of luxury. A great open fireplace, flanked by twin bookcases, occupied one side of the living room. A large photograph of Kay was centered on the marble mantelpiece. With irritation, Mark noted that it was inscribed, "With love."

BUT this was not what he had come for. Briskly, he moved across to the bedroom-alcove's closet. Opened the door.

More than a dozen suits hung in neat array before him. Mark whistled.

"Gem experting must pay off, but plenty!" he muttered.

There was work to be done, however. He pulled the key-chain from his pocket. Unhooked the pendant talisman. Gazed at it, an impish gleam in his eyes, lips crooked in a grimly humorous smile, while the seconds ticked by.

They still fascinated him, these weird, pale hands that were the mute symbol of a long-dead sorcerer's power.

"But not quite enough to make me keep 'em," he breathed softly. "No, my beauties, I still love life a little more than that."

Turning, he selected a pin-striped blue suit within the closet. Then, solemnly, addressed the hands:

"From here on out, you've got a new boss. Effective right now, I'm presenting you to Mister Graham Carson. May you serve him in all his wishes, as faithfully as you have me!" Chuckling dourly, he slipped them into the blue suit's pocket before concluding: "And if you do, God help him!"

He was half-way back across the living room when he heard the rattle of the key in the lock. The window—no, it was too far.

Then the closet!

In two quick strides he reached it. Slid back, far out of sight.

And just in time. The hall door swung open. Closed again. Lights flashed on.

Graham Carson stumbled across the room. He was breathing hard, his face flushed. He tossed his handsome grey snap-brim into one chair, slumped down in another himself.

Every muscle tense, Mark watched

him from the shadows.

Carson thrust one hand into a coat pocket. Brought it out again, gripping a snub-nosed, grimly efficient Banker's Special Colt.

Suddenly, an awful thought struck Mark:

He was rid of the hands, yes. *But they had not yet taken their toll for aiding him to escape!*

Graham Carson, however, seemed to have his mind on other matters. Now he was emptying his other coat pocket onto a handkerchief.

Mark caught his breath. It didn't take a gem expert to recognize that heap of glittering baubles as jewelry—and no paste, either.

Gathering up the display, Carson stepped over to the fireplace. He cleared the marble mantelpiece, lifted it from its base. A moment later he was placing pistol and jewelry-laden handkerchief in the hidden cavity beneath. Then, putting back the mantelpiece, he stepped into the bathroom.

Mark's mind was racing. Sudden understanding gripped him.

"No wonder the old home town's in a dither about jewel thieves, when Orton's gem expert comes back to his roost with a Colt belly-gun and a pocketful of cracked ice!" he muttered.

HIS meditations were cut short by Carson's reappearance.

This time his rival stopped by the telephone table. Lifting the receiver, he dialed a number.

"Kay? Hello, darling. I called to let you know I'd be a few minutes late . . . Yes, business. . . . No, nothing important. . . . We'll spend the evening at your place, then? That's fine. I'll be there before nine. . . . Good-bye, my dear."

That call made up Mark's mind.

"I could take him now, easy enough,"

he told himself grimly, "but I'm damned if I'll do it. Not when there's a chance I can have Kay there to see the pay-off!"

An instant later he was cowering in the closet's farthest corner. Carson had come into the alcove!

The closet door opened wide. Carson stood before it, hesitating while Mark's heart stopped.

The gem expert reached inside. Removed the hanger bearing the blue pin-striped suit. He closed the door.

Mark breathed again.

Minutes passed. Then the closet door opened again. Carson replaced the hanger. Now, however, it carried the suit he had been wearing. Every nerve on edge, Mark waited.

The gem expert, now garbed in the blue pin-stripe, moved away. With a final glance about the apartment, he switched out the light. The hall door closed behind him.

The seconds ticked by, and still Mark waited. At last, however, satisfied that his rival was really gone, he stepped out into the room. Picking up the telephone receiver, he dialed police headquarters' number.

A gruff voice answered.

"This is a friend calling," Mark reported. "You're looking for a jewel thief you call 'The Creeper,' right? Well, I've got a hunch his name is Graham Carson. He's a gem expert at Orton's, and he lives in apartment 3b, 1728 Belvidere. If you'll send a squad over there and have 'em tear out the mantelpiece over the fireplace, I think they'll find some proof of what I'm saying. . . . No, I'm not going to tell you who I am—that 'A' in 'A Friend' is for 'Anonymous'."

He slammed down the receiver, the familiar grin back on his broad face for the first time in days.

"And now," he told himself cheer-

fully, "to watch Kay when she finds out her hot-shot boyfriend is a burglar on the side. Will her face be red!"

Even as he said it, he sobered. His own face flushed.

"What a hell of a way to look at things!" he muttered. "Maybe I'm as rotten as she thinks I am, at that. I can't have her myself, so I want to make her life miserable." His jaw set. "No, damn it! I'll help the cops nail Carson, but that's all. When I'm sure they've got him dead to rights, I'll make myself scarce. There'll be no crow-eating contest under my sponsorship."

CHAPTER V

The Helping Hands

THERE was only one dim light in the living room at Kay's house, but from his vantage-point in a tree Mark could discern Carson and the girl, seated on a divan in the shadows.

Satisfied, he dropped to the ground and angled off across the lawn toward the corner drugstore. In a matter of seconds he was calling Graham Carson's number.

"Carson residence," a cold voice answered. It bore an official ring.

"This is your friend again. Did you find any of the proof I told you about?"

"That we did." The voice sounded somehow familiar. "Gun, jewelry, everything. It's the works."

"Fine." Mark chose his words carefully. "Now, Carson's over at 294 Whit-tier, visiting his girl. You can pick him up there if you hurry."

"Thanks. We'll be there."

With a click, the phone went dead.

Mark hurried back to Kay's house. There, crouched in darkness amid a clump of shrubbery, he waited for the police to arrive. His first hint of trouble was a faint rustle of grass behind him.

He started to turn.

"Hold it!"

It was the cold, clipped, somehow-familiar voice he had heard on the phone. He felt a pistol barrel nudge his back. Hands slid over him, searching for weapons. Then a flashlight's beam struck his face.

"Ho! I was right. It's the soldier."

The voice, coupled with the man's vague form behind the flash, refreshed Mark's memory.

"You're the detective who pinched me on that jewel theft charge," he ventured. "You picked me up down at the hotel—"

"Right." The slim, hard-faced officer nodded. "I figured we'd find you around here somewhere. Knew you wouldn't let a chance to be in on the kill go by." Then, with a jerk of the head toward the house: "He in there?"

"Yes."

"Good. Let's go." The detective turned to the men grouped around him. "You guys fan out. Cover the place. And don't come in, no matter what happens. That lad in there is plenty smart, and I don't want him slipping out the back way just because someone got panicky over a little noise or something."

And to Mark:

"You come with me."

"But—"

"I said you come with me. Someone's got to identify this Carson character."

In silence¹ they approached the porch. Little tremors of anxiety were jabbing at Mark. He had planned so carefully that Kay wouldn't have to face him, and now. . . .

"I'll ring the bell," the detective told him in a low, tight voice. "Less chance of trouble if we can—"

"Oh! You—! Get away from me! Don't touch me!"

It was Kay's voice. Panic-shrill, it

came like a jagged knife-slash through the still night air.

All plans went overboard.

MARK'S foot came up as if by instinct, drove at the lock, a battering-ram of flesh and bone. The door burst open. Head lowered, like a maddened bull, he charged. He was in the living room before the gaping Carson could even rise. His fist shot out, sent the gem expert careening to the floor.

"Mark, darling—!" Sobbing, Kay clung to his arm. Her face was white, her whole body trembling.

The detective, pistol in hand, took charge.

"Break it up, now!" he barked. "You—" he gestured to Carson with the weapon—, "on your feet! This is a pinch."

Mark's rival pulled himself erect.

"Just what is the meaning of this intrusion, officer?" he demanded shakily, struggling to regain his shattered composure. "This is a private home—"

"I said it was a pinch, and that's just what I meant," the detective snapped back. "I'm arresting you—and the charge is murder!"

"*Murder!*"

Mark, Kay and Carson gasped it as one.

"That's right. Murder." The detective mouthed the word with grim relish. "The Creeper killed tonight. He was picking up some choice ice at the Van Buren place this evening, cleaning out the bedroom wall safe while the family ate dinner. Old Van Buren heard him, and collected a .38 slug in the brisket for his trouble. He died on the way to the hospital."

The color was draining from Carson's face, the skin sagging with shock. He stumbled into a chair.

"I don't understand," he mumbled. "Why would you connect me with such

a horrible crime? I'm a respectable man—"

The detective cut him short:

"The loot and the gun were found hidden in your apartment a few minutes ago, with thanks to the good sergeant, here—"

Carson's head came up.

"So that's it!" he clipped. "That explains a number of things, officer. To begin with, this young man who so kindly gave you all this information was himself arrested for jewel theft yesterday afternoon. At the moment, he's a fugitive from justice: he assaulted an officer and escaped today, while being taken to court for preliminary arraignment. And finally, he happens to hate me because this young lady"—he indicated Kay—"prefers my company to his. Nothing would please him more than to frame me for his crimes." All self-confidence again now, the gem expert's thin lips twisted in a contemptuous smile. "No, officer, you've made a slight mistake. The man you want is Sergeant Mark King."

Mark's face was a study in blank bewilderment. He reeled under the sheer audacity of his rival.

But the detective was not so easily swayed.

"Perhaps you're right, Carson," he nodded icily. "If so, I'll be the first to apologize." Then, smiling unpleasantly: "We'll give both you and the sergeant a paraffin test. If you haven't fired a gun within the past few hours, you'll have nothing to fear. If you have—" He drew a finger suggestively across his throat.

Carson appeared hardly to notice. He made an elaborate business of stifling a yawn as he rose, half-turning, to his feet.

"Very well, officer. Shall we get the whole tiresome business over with at once?"

AND then he struck. The hand his body had concealed as he turned flashed up in a blur of motion. Gunfire's thunder filled the room.

Moaning, the detective sagged. The pistol slipped from his nerveless fingers. The thud was like the knell of doom.

Face contorted, teeth bared, smoking revolver still in hand, Graham Carson turned on Mark and Kay.

"You didn't think I owned one gun, did you, or that I'd let myself be taken?" he jeered. His eyes were wild, pupils dilated with madness. The sound of his hoarse breathing was loud in their ears. "You, King, stand aside! I'll teach you to meddle in my business!"

Mark paled beneath his tan. He could read death in the gleaming eyes, the flaring nostrils. They were signs he had seen before—signs graven on the hate-crazed visages of a thousand *banzai*-charging Japs. . . .

"Stand aside!"

. . . The cops—but no, they wouldn't come; they had their orders: stay put, no matter what. . . .

"It's the pay-off!" he choked beneath his breath. "The hands came through, and now they want their pound of flesh!"

"You don't look very brave, sergeant!" came Carson's jeering voice. "Don't tell me that the hero's afraid to die—that he's really got a yellow streak where his backbone ought to be—"

Suddenly, then, Mark was coldly calm. He could feel the tension oozing from him, the wave of panic fading. Now he knew what he must do—if only he could do it! Steel-nerved and dead-ly, he faced his foe.

"I'm just an average sort of a guy, Carson," he said slowly. "Not very brave, maybe, but not too yellow, either—"

Headlong, he dived for the killer's gun hand.

He heard the .38's roar, and saw the orange flame belching. The stench of burnt powder was in his nostrils, the agony of the slug that seared along his side a screaming demon in his brain.

But it didn't matter. He knew it didn't, because he was still conscious, and he could move, and his hands were on Graham Carson's gun.

Again the .38 roared. The muzzle blast was a hammer-blow of flame, the slug a red-hot needle. A sob of rage and pain tore from his throat. But still he hung on. His fingers caught at Carson's wrist.

With all his might he twisted. Felt his muscles swell in savage exaltation. Felt the other's bone and sinew giving—
Crack!

The sound of the breaking bone was like another shot, the killer's scream an animal in torment.

A spasm of strength surged through Carson. He tore himself free. Lunged for the door.

STAGGERING, drunk with shock, Mark lurched against him, blocked him. The sergeant's arm came up. Descended again, with all his weight and power behind it. The edge of his hand smashed home at the base of the killer's neck. . . .

The police surgeon finished his examination.

"His neck's broken," he announced, "but with luck, he'll still live to hang." He turned to Mark. "How about you, young fellow? You took a couple of nasty ones, even if they are only flesh wounds. Sure you don't want to go to the hospital?"

Grinning, Mark shook his head, and this time he didn't have to force it.

"I'm doing fine," he reported, looking up at Kay. His head lay in her lap.

"Oh, darling—" Joy choked her. Her face was glowing, radiant.

From a stretcher across the room, the slim, hard-faced detective laughed.

"We'll give you some peace and quiet now," he told them. And then, winking at Mark: "Don't worry about that jewel theft charge, sergeant. My report's going to mention that Big Chief Broken Neck, over there, switched brooches on you in order to get you out of the way. I'll clear up your escape this afternoon, too."

They were alone, then, with Kay running gentle fingers through Mark's hair.

"You're sure it's all okay, honey?" he whispered. "We're right back where we were before I went away?"

For the smile she gave him he would have spent a thousand years in hell.

"It's even better than before," she answered, "because now I know what you really mean to me." She hesitated a moment, then plunged on: "I was a fool, dear—a silly little fool—"

"Forget it." Mark's voice was husky. He caressed her hand. "You know, that girl in the hotel room—"

Kay's fingers closed his lips.

"I understand, sweetheart. That was my fault, too, for sending you away."

Sheer rapture was in Mark's sigh. He lay relaxed, his broad face wreathed in a beatific smile. His girl back . . . the hands disposed of . . . his rival gone . . .

"If this isn't heaven, they can have my share," he murmured. Then, as the thought struck him: "Why did you scream, honey?"

"Scream? When?"

"You know. Tonight, just before I crashed in."

"Mark, you must be imagining things, really—" The innocence of cherubs was in Kay's tone, but her face was reddening.

"You screamed." Mark was positive. "What's more, you know you did. The minute I asked you about it, you started to blush."

"Oh, Mark!" Kay hid her crimson face in her hands. "It's—oh, I hate to talk about it . . . only I guess I should, because it was then, at that moment, that I knew I loved you and that I could never marry Graham Carson."

Another pause. Then, faintly: "You see, Graham always was a perfect gentleman when he was around me until . . . well, I can't imagine why it was, but tonight he suddenly developed a *terrible* case of wandering hands!"

WEREWOLVES



By SANDY MILLER



IT HAS been said that certain men and women can, by some magic art, turn themselves into wolves or other animals, and that any wound inflicted on this transformed beast is instantly inflicted on the human body of the witch who had become the animal. There was a noble lady in Livonia who had a dispute with her slave on the subject of werewolves. She doubted that there were such beings, so to convince her that there were, he went into the next room and reappeared in the form of a wolf. Her dogs chased him into the woods where they had a fierce struggle, and the wolf lost an eye. The next day the slave returned to his mistress missing an eye.

In 1588 in a village in the mountains of Auvergne, a man saw his friend going out to hunt. He asked him to bring back some of his game to him and his friend said that he would. He had not been hunting long when he saw a wolf. He fired but missed him. The wolf attacked him and he managed to pull out his knife and cut off his front paw. The wolf fled into the forest and the hunter put the paw in his bag and went back to the village. He went to his friend to show him the paw, but when he pulled it out of his bag it had turned into a woman's hand with a golden ring on the finger. The man recognized the ring as that of his own wife. He went to find her. She was sitting by the fire with her right hand hidden beneath her apron. She refused to show it till he confronted her with the hand with the ring on it. Then she confessed the truth, that she was in the form of a werewolf that the hunter had wounded. Her husband brought her to justice and she was burned as a witch.

The Toradjas of Central Celebes are very much afraid of werewolves, and of men and women who have the power of transforming their spirits into cats, crocodiles, wild pigs and apes, deer and buffaloes, which roam about eating human flesh, especially human livers, while the men and women in their proper form are sleeping quietly in their beds at home. A man can be a werewolf at birth or become one by infection. Any slight contact with a werewolf, touching anything that has been touched by his spittle, leaning against something that a werewolf has leaned against, is enough to

turn the most innocent person into a werewolf. The penalty for being a werewolf is death, but the sentence is never passed until the accused has had a fair trial. His guilt is determined by having the accused dip his finger in boiling resin. If the finger is not burned, the man is no werewolf; but if it is burned, as of course it would be, the man is taken away to some secluded spot and backed to bits.

IN CUTTING up a werewolf, the executioners are very careful not to become spattered with blood because that of course would turn them into werewolves. So great is their fear of a werewolf that they have told missionaries that they would kill their own children if they suspected them of being such an animal. Once a werewolf came in a human shape to the house of a friend while his real body lay at home asleep. He called out softly to the man's wife, asking her to meet him next day in a tobacco field. The husband was awake and heard the whole thing but said nothing about it. The next day was a busy one in the village, as most everyone was working putting a new roof on a large house. Among them was the werewolf himself, in his own human self. The woman went out into the field, and her husband followed her without being seen. He saw the werewolf come up to his wife so he rushed out and struck him with a club. The werewolf turned into a leaf, but the man caught it and stuck it into his bamboo stick where he kept his tobacco. Then he walked back to town with his wife, carrying the bamboo stick with the werewolf in it. The human body of the werewolf was still working on the roof. The husband put the bamboo stick in the fire and the man on the roof said, "Don't do that." As the leaf in the bamboo blazed up, down fell the human form of the werewolf from the roof. He was as dead as he'd ever be.

There is an old Roman tale about a fellow named Nicerus. In the middle of the night he left town to visit a friend of his, a widow, who lived on a farm about five miles out. A very well-built soldier went along with him. The moon was shining very brightly, and as they passed

through the cemetery, the soldier stepped behind a tombstone. Niceros sat down to wait for him, and after a while he looked around for his friend. Much to his surprise he found that the soldier had stripped off all his clothes and laid them beside the road. Then he performed some mysterious ceremony over them and was immediately changed into a wolf, and ran howling into the woods. Niceros was scared most to death. When he went over to the clothes he found that they had turned to stone. He hurried on to the home of his

lady friend. She told him that if he had been there a short time before he might have been of some use. She said that a wolf had come tearing into her farmyard, scaring her cattle and pulling them apart. Her servant had speared him in the neck but he managed to get away. After bearing this, Niceros hurried home again. When he came to the place where the clothes had been, he found only a pool of blood. He found the soldier at home in bed, and a doctor was bandaging a terrible wound in his neck.

STRANGE NATIVE CUSTOMS

★ By KAY BENNETT ★

AMONG a tribe of Indians in Brazil bordering Guiana, young men who wish to get married must be stung all over with ants and wasps, which are applied to their naked bodies in the design of quadrupeds or birds. The patient falls down as though in a swoon, and is carried like dead to his hammock, where he is tied down securely with cords. As he comes to, he writhes in agony, and the hammock rocks crazily causing the whole hut to shake to the point of collapse. This ordeal is called by the Indians a "maraké."

In another tribe in French Guiana, they have this same custom, but instead of preceding a marriage, it is used as a sort of national medicine given to the young of both sexes. When used on men, the maraké sharpens their wits, and prevents them from being lazy and fat, gives them strength, and helps them to shoot well with a bow. Without this, the Indians would always be slack and sickly, and lie in their hammocks most of the time. The maraké keeps the women from going to sleep, makes them brisk and strong, and good housekeepers. Everyone in their tribe has a maraké at least twice in their life.

The Indians of St. Juan Capistrano in California used to be branded on some part of their bodies, usually a leg or arm, because they believed that this custom added strength to the nerves and made them better able to handle a bow. After this branding, they were whipped with nettles and covered with ants, to make them more robust. This custom was always performed in summer when the nettles were in their most effective state. They gathered small bunches which they tied together, and the poor deluded Indian was chastised by whipping him with them on the naked limbs until he was unable to walk. Next he would be carried to the nest of a specie of biting ants, and laid down among them, while friends poked at them with sticks to make them more furious. Their great faith gave them power to undergo all this punishment without uttering a cry of pain. Having gone through these dreadful ordeals, they were considered invulnerable by their enemies.

CANNIBALISM ON EASTER ISLAND

★ By FRAN FERRIS ★

CANNIBALISM on Easter Island had none of the religious significance that was associated with it on other South Sea islands. An Easter Island warrior never thought that by eating the heart of an enemy he might strengthen himself morally and physically. He only felt that by eating his victim he might stave off starvation a little longer.

When one clan took offense at another clan and war seemed inevitable, spearheads were sharpened, old shafts were renewed, and stones small enough to be thrown by hand were gathered. Lizard headed clubs were taken from biding places, war dances performed, and fires were lighted in the hills. When all was ready the armies started moving toward each other. When they were close enough they started throwing stones. They practised this science during most of their spare time and developed an accuracy which is said to be deadly. Aside from such missiles they were without long distance weapons. So the warriors fought almost toe to toe, interested only in killing the man in front of him. The battle continued until the immediate cause of the trouble, perhaps some murderous clansman, was killed. Then instantly, all hostilities stopped. All the combatants still alive set about preparing an oven to accommodate the victims. The next few nights and days were spent in feasting, and then they all went home to wait till the next war and another feast.

Of course some wars were much more serious and could not be settled by killing just a few people. In such conflicts the fighting often spread to several clans and did not cease till the offending community was virtually wiped out. Sometimes the fighting stopped short of elimination of the defeated clan but only when they consented to spend the rest of their lives in slavery to the victors. On one occasion the warriors fled from the battlefield and hid in a cave. The victors were very pleased by this solution of their problems. They kept the island as a corral from which they took new victims as often as their dietetic requirements demanded meat.

The GIFT

by BERKELEY LIVINGSTON

To give is better than to receive—unless the gift is made with intended malice



“STOP here, Arthur.”

“Here, sir?” Arthur’s voice echoed surprise.

“Yes. And pick me up in about ten minutes.”

“Very well, sir.”

Whitlow Hyatt surveyed the scene with an expression of delight in his pale, arrogant eyes. They were his distinguishing mark, his eyes. For otherwise his face held nothing in its somewhat flabby fleshiness to make it worth a second glance. He had a nose, chin, mouth that were not much different from those of the flop slobs on Skid Row. He only looked more clean, better fed and showed less signs of moral disintegration. Too, his clothes, even if the label were not a sufficient identification of their expense, had the lines of custom tailoring.

It was early evening. The sky to the west held a rosy effulgence of nimb in its palm and from its edges, streamers of light showered where the sun had hidden its glory. But Hyatt had no eyes for the beauty that was the dying day. Nor did he, on the other hand, show an interest in the ugliness that was to be seen at street level.

The passing cars raised dust devils which hung momentarily on the breathless air and subsided to the pavement until the next car gave them new life. Tattered sections of newspapers spread their inked caricatures of life over



Hyatt had the strange feeling that somewhere he had done this before . . .

the curbing. Now and then a passing human wreck would pause in his aimless wandering and peer through red-rimmed, lifeless eyes at the print. And sometimes one would slip to the concrete, as though his limbs had given up the struggle, the sheer futility of going nowhere. Then the grimed, taloned fingers would wind their useless bonds around the lifeless printed page and the empty eyes would stare unseeing at the mirrored emptiness that was held before them.

There were others. These too, shambled wearily over the hot concrete until they reached an island formed of several of their fellow *men*. If a voice, a gesture, an odor from the island registered through the apathy, they would stop and join the strange group. For it was a strange group. There were no bonds of human companionship, of common good-will, of conversation, of any of the qualities that make men draw to one another. They stood together, sometimes shoulder to shoulder, or leaned wearily against some window front. Their eyes saw only the littered pavement at their feet. And their voices were hollow grunts which now and then resolved themselves to understandable words. But those words, too, had no meaning. They were sounds which were made, as if the one making them wanted to hear himself, for fear that he had lost that sense.

Hyatt saw none of these. His pale eyes looked with a sort of grim appreciation on the rows of alternating taverns and shops which were the oases in the midst of Skid Row desert. Despite the disparity of style and architecture, they held an odd sameness in that there was an overlay of meanness in all of them. He remained standing on the curb where Arthur, his chauffeur, had left him off. Not until the Cadillac

was out of sight did Hyatt stir.

He did an odd thing, then. Turning, he went across the street. There was nothing furtive in his action. Yet there was an air of secretiveness in the very fact that he waited until Arthur was out of sight before he moved. As if he didn't want the chauffeur to see where he went.

He turned into a tavern, half-way up the block. Although it was early, there were already some twenty odd people lined up at the bar. The bar featured fifteen cent shots and ten cent schooners of beer. Hyatt surveyed the interior with a small twitching of his lips which was the only sign of a smile his small, pale-lipped mouth ever gave.

But his arrogant eyes passed in disinterested revue over the men at the bar until they found the one man they were looking for. And even then there was no sign of recognition in them. There were none to see or recognize the fires which suddenly blazed behind the pale lids.

THERE was nothing about the man Hyatt had come to seek to distinguish him from the other derelicts lined along the bar. For all of them had a certain vagueness to their features which somehow defied a describing word. It was as if they were wearing a common mask, a mask which they had worn for so long that they had no memory of another.

Hyatt made straight for the end figure. He poked at the man with a finger, which when it contacted the filthy garment that covered the upper part of the body, became shy and folded itself into the palm quickly.

"You. I want to talk to you," Hyatt said.

"Wha' for?" the other asked. He didn't turn from the bar. And his eyes remained sunk in contemplation of

the small glass of whiskey on the bar. "Look at me! Do you remember me?" Hyatt persisted.

The other turned then. And Hyatt saw a small face, narrowing from a wide forehead to an outthrust, pointed chin. The man hadn't known the touch of a razor in several days. Dark beard-stubble grew across the ridge of cheek and chin like the straggling grass on an unkempt lawn. The inflamed, red-rimmed eyelids were parted enough so that Hyatt saw the twin, blank shells of the other's eyes.

"Well?" Hyatt said.

The other turned but before he had quite completed his gesture, Hyatt's other hand came up from the trouser pocket it had gone into. There was a bill nestling between the fingers. Hyatt spread the bill wide. A dim light came into being in the other's eyes at sight of the bill. A pink triangle of tongue came out to lick at the cracked, tight skin of his lips.

Once more, this time in a low, compelling voice, Hyatt asked, "Well?"

"Wha' ya want?"

Hyatt looked around him. There were three tables set along the side wall, not far from the back of the tavern. He made for one of them, gesturing with his head for the other to follow.

"I asked if you remembered me," Hyatt said in reminder, when they were sitting at the table.

"Why should I?" the other asked.

"Because I gave you ten dollars last night."

The other looked down at the bare table-top. There was no inflection to his voice when he answered:

"Yeah. Now I got it. Last night. You and le's see . . . nope. All I c'n get is you slippin' me the sawbuck."

"Right. And do you know why I gave it to you?"

"Nope. All I wanta know is, am I

gonna get what you waved in my face at the bar?"

"Perhaps. But first let me tell you why I gave you the ten dollars last night. Sit down!" Hyatt bit out as the other made a move to get up.

"Wha' for? You a Bible spouter gonna reform me?"

"See this?" Hyatt replied, as he pulled the bill from his pocket once more. "It's a twenty dollar bill. There'll be ten of these for you at the end of every week, if you want them."

"Two hunnert bucks! And you wanta give it to me every week. Why?"

"That's better. Because I can use you. Or rather I can use that peculiar gift you possess."

THAT elicited a grunt from the other. It was the first expression, vocal or otherwise, that he had given to Hyatt's words.

Hyatt's lips twitched in a smile once more. He felt certain, now, that the other was going to take the offer. Hyatt explained:

"Last night I saw you perform a miracle of memory magic. I'm pretty sure that you don't have any idea about what I'm talking. But as the bartender explained to my friends and myself when we stopped in here last night for a drink you'd perform for us. I must say it was sheer magic the way we'd give you the most complicated series of numbers and symbols . . . there was a famous mathematician among us . . . and in a matter of seconds you gave us the answer. But to my way of thinking, the most interesting part of your performance was when you repeated to us long list of numbers, in their correct sequence."

The mask had lifted from the other's face as Hyatt talked on. Bewilderment rode, like a painter's calcimine brush, across the wooden-still features. His

mouth gaped foolishly and now and then the eyes would blink rapidly, as if the light of his accomplishments were too much for him.

"Well, my friend," Hyatt asked when he was through listing the other's incredible feats of mental legerdemain, "do you want the job?"

"What job?" the other quavered.

Hyatt sighed. He realized then that this man's mind held no concentration other than for that strange faculty he possessed. Perhaps if he pretended to give up in his quest . . . he arose suddenly and shoved away from the table.

"Ah, well. If you don't want this money. Of course there's a hell of a lot of drinks can be bought with two hundred dollars."

"Mister," the other said with an animation that somehow sounded foreign, "I'm your boy. When do I start getting this moola?"

Hyatt tossed the bill to the other whose incredibly dirty fist closed about it like a mouth which had not known either food or drink for a very long time.

"You start this very minute," Hyatt said. "Let's go."

"Go? Where to?"

Hyatt didn't answer, except to wave with his hand toward the door. The other got up at the gesture and walked before Hyatt.

Arthur was waiting with the Cadillac. His servant's face broke its composure at the sight of the ragged human who walked beside his master. And when Hyatt held the car door open and said, "Get in," Arthur voiced a protest that was a reflex thought.

"But, sir! He may . . . he may be, er, lousy."

"Probably," Hyatt replied. "Never mind that. Drive to the Pllaner House."

Once again it was the well-trained servant who replied, "Yes sir."

HYATT followed the preconceived plan which had been born the night before. He had been a guest at the home of one of his associates who in the course of the evening had suggested a visit to Skid Row to see how the lowest level of humanity lived. The guests had fallen in with the suggestion. And as Hyatt had explained, they had stopped in at the tavern where they had been treated to the show the derelict had given. Now they were to take the second step in that plan.

It almost didn't succeed. The manager's palm had to be greased with a twenty-dollar bill before he consented to let Hyatt register the other. His name proved to be Carne Dabnis. And even after accepting the bribe, the manager insisted that Dabnis accompany a bellhop to a service elevator so that no one would suspect he had been given a room.

Once Dabnis was in the room, things moved with an amazing celerity. Hyatt phoned for the hotel barber after he made Dabnis remove his clothes and take a bath. He told the barber to bring a delousing spray outfit. Previously, Hyatt had instructed Arthur to have one of the salesmen in the clothing store which occupied ground floor space in the hotel, to come to the room. Within two hours of Dabnis' arrival, he had been bathed, shaved, hair-cutted, deloused and had a complete change of clothing from the skin out.

Hyatt sat in the lounge chair and watched Dabnis adjust the bow tie. There was an icy glitter of amusement in the pale eyes of the man. Everything was working out as he had planned, and he had an excellent idea that the rest of his plan was also going to come to fruition. Right now, he speculated on Dabnis' past.

The derelict presented an appearance that was a complete change from the

man Hyatt had picked up in a Skid Row saloon. It was not alone a matter of dress, but an inner something. It was not that the shoulders on the suit he had on fit better than those on the rag he had before. It was that the shoulders themselves set squarer. The back was straighter. The face more resolute. And even the eyes seemed to have lost their dullness and had taken on life and sparkle.

Hyatt chuckled suddenly, a thread of sound that barely passed the lips. Dabnis had suddenly thought of the twenty-dollar bill Hyatt had given him. And had taken it from the pocket of the filthy trousers. Hyatt had chuckled because Dabnis' fingers had hesitated, as though they had been afraid of contamination, when they reached for the bill.

"Well, Dabnis. How do you feel now?" Hyatt asked.

"Better. Thanks," Dabnis said without turning to look at his benefactor. He was still busy getting the right touch to the bow tie.

"That's fine. And now Arthur will take us home."

"Home? I thought this was to be my home?"

Even as Hyatt answered, "No," he thought it odd that not only had Dabnis changed his appearance, but that the change had gone so deep it had affected his speech. "No," Hyatt reiterated. "You see, you're something that, well, something in which I've invested money. And, like any investment, you need looking after."

And for the first time Dabnis smiled. He had remarkably white and even teeth. It was a nice smile that curled the corners of his mouth up like a cat's.

"Okay. I've waited a long time for this. Might as well take what's coming," Dabnis said.

Little lines of puzzlement appeared in Hyatt's forehead.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Hyatt said.

"You should," was the enigmatic reply. "Ready?"

"Ah-yes! Of course," Hyatt's words had a worried edge to them.

THIS time it was Dabnis who showed Hyatt to the door.

Whitlow Hyatt felt an odd misgiving as he looked at Carne Dabnis. The ex-bum was engrossed in one of the many fine prints that were part of a collection Hyatt owned. Dabnis had an air of ease and well-being about him now. In fact Hyatt had noticed the change in Dabnis' behavior as the evening lengthened. It had begun in the hotel room and had progressed through definite stages until now, in Hyatt's baronial mansion in one of the most exclusive North Chicago suburbs, Dabnis acted as if he was the master.

Dabnis turned from his inspection of the print and said:

"Fair. Just fair. The artist has a flair for this but I've seen better."

"Sit down, Dabnis," Hyatt said. "You interest me and I'd like to know why. Tell me a little of yourself. Y'know, I find it odd, for example, that in so short a time there has been such a great transformation."

Arthur, now in the dark coat, shiny between the shoulder blades, and dark trousers of a house servant, entered. He carried a tray with a cut-glass decanter and a single, long-stemmed glass on the tray's gleaming surface. He deposited the tray and its contents on a small cocktail table, poured some whisky into the glass and offered it to Hyatt. Then he turned and started to leave the room.

"Arthur. Haven't you forgotten something?" Dabnis asked.

The servant turned and raised his eyebrows.

"Forgotten? I don't understand."

"Another glass, Arthur. Your master's . . . guest, would like a drink."

The servant's features flushed in outraged indignation. And the calm of his interior was broken by the request.

"Guest! Why . . . why, you're . . ."

"Arthur!" Hyatt's voice cut through the indignation. "Another glass, please."

The only acknowledgment of the victory Dabnis gave was a crinkle at the corners of his mouth.

Hyatt resumed where he had left off:

"Tell me about yourself. You weren't always a bum."

"No, I wasn't always a bum," Dabnis conceded. "Matter of fact, I had money once. A great deal of it. But I also had more than a touch of the wanderlust. The two do not go well together. The last adventure brought me to where you found me. And that reminds me. I want to thank you for rescuing me from that desert wasteland. Of course it was only turnabout. Still, in the final account, it will add up."

"Final account? What do you mean?" Hyatt asked.

Dabnis held the glass of amber-colored liquid up so that the light from the chandelier shone through it.

"You said you had work for me," he said, by way of explanation. "Surely you aren't going to give me two hundred dollars a week just to be your house guest."

"OH, I see. That's what you mean. Well, you're right. And you're not going to be my house guest long, by the way. Only until I feel sure that whisky and you aren't inseparable."

Dabnis brought the glass down and swallowed its contents.

"Why take a chance? Here you have the opportunity to make certain," he said.

Hyatt thought it over for a second.

"Say, that is a thought. Now, as to the work that I have in mind for you. I am a broker dealing mostly in foreign currencies. There is a great deal of bookkeeping attached to the handling of my accounts. Not so much for myself, but rather for the convenience of the government since all brokerage businesses are under federal supervision.

"Now there are certain deals in which an amount of secrecy is required. Putting it bluntly, I don't want the government to know of these deals. That's where you come in. Understand me, there isn't anything crooked about this work. Just that what the government doesn't know, it can't collect on."

Dabnis had given Hyatt his closest attention as the other outlined the *why* of the work he had in mind.

"And what are my duties?" Dabnis asked, softly.

"Acting as auditor for me," Hyatt replied. "Keeping the information you get from me in the back of your mind until the time comes when I want it. There will be any number of times when your head will hold what to you will be a mass of disassociated figures. But when I want them you will give them to me in the same order as I gave them to you. Sounds involved, doesn't it?"

Dabnis shrugged his shoulders and said:

"If that's what you want, it's all right with me. Although I still don't understand how I can help."

"Let's put it this way," Hyatt said. "I can fool the government by using a multiple set of books. But that would mean the use of a number of people, bookkeepers, clerks and an auditor. Sooner or later there's bound to be a misstep. This way only you will have any knowledge of these secret figures. But that's all. What their relation will

be to the business I'm in will be a mystery to you. Now do you get it?"

Dabnis turned his head and looked at the glass, empty now, and said, "Yes." But Hyatt didn't see the look which had crept into his eyes. If he had, he wouldn't have looked so pleased with himself.

Hyatt was smothering a yawn with a broad, fleshy palm when Dabnis looked at him again. "So I'm to share in the fruits from your illegitimate dealings," Dabnis, still speaking softly, said.

"Huh?" Hyatt said sleepily. He hadn't quite heard the other.

"Time to go to bed, I think," Dabnis answered.

"IF YOU'LL pardon me, sir," Arthur said.

"Yes," Hyatt lifted his eyes from the book he was reading.

"I, uh," Arthur hesitated, then went on in a burst of confidence. "I only wanted to say that I'm leaving you, sir."

"Leaving me!" Hyatt exclaimed in horror. "But why, Arthur? Aren't you getting enough money? Is there something wrong? You can't do this to me! I . . . I won't let you."

"Oh, it's not you, sir. It's, well, ever since that man came here! He's unbearable. I'm sorry, sir. I'm quitting as of tonight."

"Tell me, man. What's wrong?" Hyatt pleaded. Arthur was the best man he'd ever had. He was an excellent chauffer and a superb cook. More, he had all the graces of a good servant with none of the faults.

"It's like this, sir," Arthur went on, now that the bridge had been crossed. "In the beginning, he wasn't difficult. That is, I took into account his background. But he's been here two weeks now. And every day it becomes more unbearable. It's, do this, Arthur, and

do that! He orders me around like I was his personal servant. Like this morning. I came into his room to tell him that breakfast was ready. I never heard such language! And simply because I'd disturbed him at his morning's prayer."

Hyatt's eyes clouded in anger. He knew what Arthur meant. Dabnis, it turned out, believed in some foreign religion. His room had a small ante-chamber which he had been using as a sanctuary for prayer. Morning and night Dabnis prayed in a strange tongue to some foreign God.

"Where is he now?" Hyatt asked. His voice was tight with passion.

"In the garden, sir."

"Hold on for today," Hyatt said. "I'll have a talk with him. And when I'm through, I don't think he'll be so cocky."

"Look here, Dabnis!" Hyatt said loudly.

Dabnis looked up and smiled in greeting. He was sitting in a deck chair placed in such a position that he could see the brook not far off. The sun, filtering through the leaves of the large elm tree, made pretty patterns on the ground. The chair held a cool drink on one of its arms. A book lay on Dabnis' lap. Hyatt saw it was his unexpurgated edition of *Arabian Nights*.

"Arthur's been telling me that you've been cussing him out because he walked in on you this morning," Hyatt said. "And he's threatened to quit because of it. Not only that, but there are other things. I'll talk of those later. I don't want him to quit, understand! So you go right in there and apologize."

Dabnis stopped smiling. He didn't say anything for a few seconds and when he did say something, it wasn't what Hyatt expected.

"Have you ever read this book?" he asked.

Hyatt's mouth drooped in surprise. "Y'know," Dabnis went on, "there's one thing wrong with all books of this nature. A twice-told tale either gains or loses something with its re-telling. Whichever it is, a gain or loss, the truth is no longer in it. For the most part, Scheherazade stuck to the truth, as she knew it. But in some of the tales, she told only a recognized version.

"I'm speaking of the adventures of Es-Sinnbad."

Hyatt shook off the surprise of Dabnis' strange words.

"What the hell are you talking about? And what's that got to do with Arthur? Hold on!" he shouted as Dabnis began to talk again. "You're going to listen to me! Arthur's not the only one who's got his hair up. I'm getting fed up with you too. Don't forget! I took you out of that gutter that was your home. And I can send you back there just as easily."

"The importance of a man can only be measured by his deeds," Dabnis said softly. "If Arthur means more to you than I . . ."

HYATT'S jaw went slack as Dabnis' words sank in. His rage cooled as quickly as it had risen. There were other servants, perhaps not as good as Arthur, but in time they might be. No one could take Dabnis' place, however.

"Y'know," Dabnis' irritating voice went on. "I don't like that Arthur. He's a sneak. Always prying. And if he thinks he's found something he runs to tell you, as if there were a special reward for such things. I think you ought to let him go. Yes. It would be best."

"But who . . ." Hyatt bleated.

"We'll find someone," Dabnis said.

Quite suddenly Hyatt remembered something. The telephone operator had mentioned as Hyatt was leaving the office that there had been a call from

Argentina. And that "Mister Dabnis had taken it." Dabnis hadn't said a word about it.

"By the way, Dabnis," Hyatt asked in a quiet tone, "who was it called from Buenos Aires?"

"Aurelia," Dabnis said in a tone of light dismissal.

"Uh huh. And what did he want?"

"Said he had an opportunity to buy pounds at five per cent discount. I told him no, that it were better to leave that in my hands."

"*You told him what?*" Hyatt exclaimed in horror.

"Yes. I don't think you'll want to deal with any of those agents any more. No use taking the chance of a leak at their end. I can handle all the details without book work. My phenomenal memory," Dabnis added maliciously.

"Damn your memory!" Hyatt exploded.

"My dear man," Dabnis said in a calculating, deliberately provocative way. "Do you know that if I were to go to the government with what I know, that they can send you to prison for the rest of your life?"

"So that's it! That's what you've been leading up to! I thought there was something in the wind lately. You've been too cocksure, too smart-alecky. Well, this time you've gone too far. Threatening me! I'll show you . . . get out of here! Get back to the . . ."

Dabnis smiled somewhat grimly. The choleric, purple-colored face pressing down at him, the eyes, flashing circles of pale ice, irritated him.

"You might as well calm down, Hyatt," he said peremptorily. "It won't do you a bit of good bleating like a pig before the butcher's knife. The ruble lost three points on the world market Tuesday. And you made a quarter million dollars selling it short. And I know exactly how you did it. The SEC

is still going around in circles from that deal. I can show them, to the last penny and to the last figure, how you did it. Do you want to hear how?"

The color faded from Hyatt's face. Suddenly his soul was flooded with a vast fear. This grinning devil *knew* how all of the illegal transactions had been made. Hyatt realized that he had taken a viper to bed with him. He had outsmarted himself. And in that same moment, he also saw that Dabnis could put himself in the clear with the authorities simply by saying he had just come to the realization of Hyatt's crookedness.

"Well, now," Hyatt hedged ineptly. "Guess I lost my head a bit. That darn fool Arthur. I've had him with me so long . . . Why, I, he just took me off my feet. But as you say, he can be replaced. Matter of fact, I think I'll get on the phone now. See you later, Dabnis."

"By the way," Dabnis called to the retreating figure. "Be a good fella and bring me a fresh drink when you come back."

IT WASN'T a request. It was a command.

The great house slept. The stillness of death flooded its stretches. In the library, Hyatt nodded over a book. Only he was not asleep. But the heavy limbs, and flabby flesh held a quiet repose that was like sleep. His fingers leafed through the pages of the book on his lap. It was the same book Dabnis had recommended he read.

Within the twisted, tortured heart of Whitlow Hyatt a great fear had been born. The lyric prose of Burton's writing had wooed and won him. And somehow, as Hyatt read the pages of Es-Sinnbad's adventures, a strange compelling thing came to pass. The figure of Carne Dabnis strode through the

pages and merged smoothly with that of the sailor-adventurer, Es-Sinnbad. Beads of sweat stood out on Hyatt's forehead. There was something he had to know!

Softly he rose from the padded chair with a stealth like that of a thief, made his way to the room occupied by Dabnis. There was no need for the sly approach. Arthur was no longer there. Only the two of them lived in the immense home. Yet Hyatt moved on cat-like tread.

Not the faintest sound announced the opening of the door. Hyatt paused, his hand still on the knob, and waited with indrawn breath. Nothing. He closed the door behind him and looked curiously about the room. It was the first time he had been within this chamber, that seemed to hold such value to Dabnis.

A prayer rug lay neatly rolled up in a corner. There was no other furniture in the room. Other than the object of piety in the corner, the room was bare. It came as something of a shock to Hyatt that the holy of holies held so little. He had hoped to see and yet, at the same time, been afraid of seeing strange, perhaps weird and fearsome things. This rather empty room proved nothing.

There was another door which led directly into Dabnis' bedchamber. It was open. A small light drew shadows on that part of the wall visible to Hyatt. Then he was on the threshold . . . and beyond. Dabnis lay stark naked on the bed. His eyes were closed and his mouth opened and closed in constant flux. He was asleep. Hyatt looked around and his eyes grew puzzled. Surely there was something here that would prove to be the key to this mystery. Perhaps the closet in the corner? Hyatt kept one eye on Dabnis as he advanced to the closet.

The door swung open . . . and Dabnis said:

"You won't find anything there."

"I thought I might," Hyatt said mildly, and came close to the bed.

THE light reflected tiny lances of flame from the eyes of the man on the bed. Dabnis' voice had a quality of deep humor:

"What did you expect to find, El-Khaleef?"

"Why did you tell me to read that book?" Hyatt asked pointedly.

"Ah! So you did. What do you think of it?" Dabnis asked. He sat up straight and looked keenly at Hyatt.

"Why did you tell me to read that book?" Hyatt asked once more.

"Not the book entirely. Just the story of Es-Sinnbad. Particularly the adventure with the man of the sea."

"So?"

"An interesting tale, wasn't it? A beast and his burden. The world is more prosaic now. And such things are called fairy tales. But in the land—and time I come from, we know otherwise. The flesh rots into dust and is blown away. But the soul, having life everlasting, seeks a new body. Thus the cycle of life is never ended.

"I could tell a modern Scheherazade of the most amazing adventures. But, alas, the Khaleef is gone. And there is no longer a need for her. Still, I must be what I am and complete the cycle given my shell of flesh. And if no one knows that I am Es-Sinnbad—and you are the *beast of burden*, we at least know it."

A distorted sound came from Hyatt's lips. It might have been taken for laughter. Or madness.

"But you are wrong," Hyatt cackled joyously. "You were the beast of burden. *You* carried me around. And by all that's holy, if what you say is true . . ."

"Yes. What *I* say is true. *Not what Scheherazade said.* The only bit of truth she told was that I was washed up on the island. And that old man found me. But because she had to make all my adventures prove that I was favorite of the All-High's, she also had to make me out a hero. El-Khaleef like the tale greatly."

Anger swelled the muscles in Hyatt's jaw until they stood out like knots. Cords of veins pulsed in this throat. Voicing an inarticulate cry, Hyatt suddenly turned and ran from the room as if a thousand devils were pursuing him. While from the man on the bed peal after peal of high-pitched laughter welled in a rising tide.

HYATT twisted and turned but no matter what new position he found, the moment he closed his eyes a picture would swim up behind the lids. A sun which had never seemed to have known the cooling of clouds rode roughshod over a desert land. Hyatt sat cross-legged on the shores of a mighty sea, whose placid bosom was empty of life or motion. Behind him a few palms reared their frouds into the air. And behind those there was the stubborn close-knit sweep of jungle vegetation.

Then, with the suddenness of a typhoon, a man came from behind the thicket to the rear of Hyatt. He was a thin man, thin to the point where each rib was clearly etched on the skinny frame. The one who was lost in the majesty of the water did not see the new arrival. Nor did he hear the stealthy approach of the other. Only when the thin one leaped the last few feet, to land astride the seated man, was he aware of another human's proximity.

Hyatt saw this in his mind's eye. Yet it was as if he was experiencing what was taking place. So that *he* felt the

impact of the other's leap.

The skinny one wound his legs around the throat of Hyatt and commanded him to take him back into the jungle. Then a veil of darkness would come over the screen of his imagination.

HYATT opened his eyes. Beyond the ledge of the window the night was giving way to the coming day. A new shade of grayness was replacing that of the moment which was between dawn and night. A cool, damp wind brushed gently at Hyatt's sweat-dampened brow. He arose from the bed and walked to the window. His lungs gulped deeply of the fragrant air. It felt good. Then he thought again of the strange things that had been said earlier in the evening and the old fear swept over him.

What did it mean? What did that picture his mind had conjured up mean? He yawned suddenly and realized that he was sleepy. And when he lay down this time, sleep washed over him like a beneficent shower.

"Hyatt, Hyatt," a voice called him out of the drugged sleep he was in.

Hyatt struggled out of bed. He recognized the voice as that of Dabnis. Still half asleep, he made his way to the other's bed room. Dabnis was sitting up in the same position he was in when Hyatt had last seen him. Hyatt smothered a yawn and asked:

"What's the row? What do you want?"

"My breakfast, of course," Dabnis said.

A savage reply that would have told Dabnis what to do suddenly died in Hyatt's throat. Something strange had been effected in Dabnis over night. The half-smile that was like a sneer was gone from the other's lips. The triangular face, with its narrow line of eyebrow and small parrot-beak of a

nose had undergone a slight transformation. There were odd marks of age in the face now. Little lines and wrinkles suddenly appeared. And the eyes. They compelled Hyatt to come closer, to look deeper into them. They were such strange eyes, golden-flecked, evil eyes. Eyes which held a world's wisdom and a world's mystery in their depths. Their golden flecks whirled about an axis that was like a well of darkness. And Hyatt felt himself falling forward into those golden depths.

Slowly, he swam up from the depths. The golden-tinted water had felt so warm, so sustaining. And now he was in a cool place where peace, ineffable, washed over him. The room hadn't changed. Nor had the man on the bed. If anything, everything was as it should have been. What was it his master had asked for? Breakfast. Yes, of course.

Hyatt executed a deep obeisance and backed from the room, his head bowed low.

Carne Dabnis watched Hyatt approach. A network of tiny wrinkles covered the face of the watcher. Two weeks had passed since Dabnis had revealed to Hyatt what their relationship was. And in those two weeks, Dabnis had aged years. The sprightliness was gone from his limbs. Lethargy gripped him tightly.

HYATT, too, had changed. Although he was a large man, he had always walked with a certain grace that was at odds with his large figure. He had always stood strongly erect in the full consciousness of his power. All that was gone now. And when he came close, Dabnis saw that the identifying label of Hyatt's personality, his arrogant eyes, had lost their label. They were dull now, brutish looking, with red-rimmed eyelids. And the paleness had given

way to blankness which once in a while and only when Hyatt thought that Dabnis was unaware of his stare, to deep hatred.

"Yes, master?" Hyatt asked when he had come within a few feet of the reclining figure.

"The sun has tired me," Dabnis replied. "Move me to where there is shade. And then bring me cool drinks."

There was an odd note of tiredness to his voice.

Hyatt kept his eyes fixed to the ground. Slowly he stooped and lifted the chair and man and carried him the few feet necessary to where the sun was balked by the deeper foliage of the elm. Gently Hyatt placed his burden down.

Dabnis sipped at the liquid. Now and then Hyatt lifted his eyes and seeing the iced drink would lick at dry lips. He was thirsty. But he knew better than to ask for a drink. He still remembered what had happened the last time such a thing occurred. Dabnis had started to hand him the glass and as Hyatt reached for it, Dabnis had hurled the glass and all into his face; then had commanded Hyatt to fetch the whip. Hyatt's stomach turned at the memory. That whip! Dabnis had bought it in the first week of his stay. But until that day, he had never used it. Hyatt had wondered for what purpose Dabnis intended it. He knew then.

It was not the last time it had been used. Hyatt's back bore many marks from it. He never knew when its snake-like length would wind around his back or chest, nor would there have to be reason for its use. And so the eyes grew more blank. And the hatred within them grew deeper and stronger. But Dabnis only grinned, as he watched Hyatt.

"Is my master going to the office today?" Hyatt asked.

"No," Dabnis mimicked the other's voice. "Your master is not going to the office today. Are you worried?"

"No, master."

"You should feel better now. You won't have to carry me. Does that make you feel better? . . . Well! Answer me!"

Hyatt suddenly felt cold. The devil was in one of his moods. How could he answer the question and satisfy Dabnis? Hyatt's mind searched desperately for the answer. And all the time the other regarded him with eyes that were flame-flecked. Hyatt tried to open his mouth as he saw that terrible look dawn on the other's face. But the lips twitched uselessly.

"Well?" came the soft-voiced, inexorable demand.

Hyatt thought he had the answer. Almost triumphantly, he whispered, "What my master wishes, are my commands."

Dabnis sighed, a small sound of pleasure which oozed from his thin, taut lips.

"So. You are learning. That is not good. I do not wish you to learn."

Hyatt's head drooped lower until his chin rested against his chest. He could feel his flesh crawl in anticipation of the whip's lashing bite. In another second, Dabnis would say, "Fetch it!" But the command never came. Instead the other said:

"How you hate me! It is well. So I hated you in that other land and time. And waited and watched for that chance to come when you would be helpless. Just as you wait."

QUITE suddenly, Hyatt lifted his head and Dabnis saw that the blankness of those pale eyes had been torn to bits. A something which had been wrung from Hyatt's very soul had lifted the veil from them.

"Tell me, master," Hyatt begged, "why, when I see that life in my mind's eye, I see you as you are now? If what you say is true, then the picture shows me as Sinbad and you as the old man of the sea."

"It thinks! The beast thinks!" Dabnis cackled in pleasure. "Memory returns to it. *Hee hee!* And it asks questions. Good. Well then. Your picture has played you false. Were there labels in the picture? Did one of them say you were Es-Sinnbad? Hah! Listen, then. I found you, a beast-like human, who knew only that it had to have food and drink. But that beast had no reasoning faculties. So I put it to work, doing the only thing it was capable of doing, a beast's work."

"But the picture," Hyatt could not get it out of his mind. "We are as now in appearance."

Dabnis' answer flayed him. "The picture! Of course we are the same. Where did you get the idea that we looked otherwise? From the book. You idiot! I told you Scheherazade only told what she wanted to. She had to make me beautiful. I was her husband! And El-Khaleef gave her many things in return for her . . . story-telling."

Torturing despair gripped Hyatt and tormented him. How long was this to go on? He had to get rid of this . . . What was it Dabnis had said? "How I hated you." Why had he said it? It should have been the other way around. Of course. The whole thing was a lie. Dabnis was the old man of the sea. Then all he had to do was wait until the time came when Dabnis was so helpless that Hyatt could do what he wanted.

"I grow weary. Carry me to my room," Dabnis said.

Hyatt lifted him from the chair, in obedience to the order. At first Dabnis had been satisfied to be carried in

Hyatt's arms. But in the past few days Dabnis only wanted to be carried high on Hyatt's shoulders, with his legs drawn up tight under Hyatt's chin. Then if Hyatt didn't please him in any way Dabnis had but to tighten his legs' grip and Hyatt would feel that terrible choking.

They came to the little brook which cut across the broad expanse of green-sward. It was a tiny brook, perhaps ten feet across and a foot deep. Only when there had been a huge downpour of rain did the brook grow large and strong. Then it widened and overran its banks. And the water would come hip-high to Hyatt. Hyatt was breathing in smothered gasps when they reached Dabnis' room. Yet tired as he was, Hyatt knew better than to release Dabnis abruptly. He laid him down gently as a babe is lowered into its crib.

"Do not go far," Dabnis admonished. "I shall want food later."

Hyatt nodded in understanding and left the room to sit cross-legged just beyond the threshold. And for the first time a plan had begun to take shape in Hyatt's mind. A plan for the destruction of Dabnis. As they were crossing the brook Hyatt had almost slipped on its slippery bottom. Suppose the brook had been higher, deeper, Hyatt thought. Then if he had fallen into it and gripped the choking legs tighter, so that the other could not loosen them, the devil on his back would surely drown.

And for the first time Hyatt obeyed every order to its fullest. Nor did he make a mistake for the balance of the day.

THAT night it stormed. And Hyatt was awakened by the thunder and lightning and rush of water. He smiled, there in the darkness. For he knew that in the morning the brook would be a miniature river, whose waters were

going to make matters right. It would look like an accident. He was going to make sure of it. When he fell, he was going to see to it that Dabnis would strike the bottom with such force consciousness would leave him.

Accidental drowning, the police would call it.

Hyatt slept well the balance of the night.

The next morning, as he had done every morning for the past two weeks, Hyatt prepared breakfast for Dabnis. Dabnis was awake when Hyatt entered the room. Hyatt's mind was too full of his plan to notice that Dabnis' hands shook, as with the palsy. And that the wrinkles had multiplied on his face. Nor did he see that Dabnis' eyes were clouded over, as though with a film.

"Couldn't sleep a wink last night," Dabnis said. His voice was a hoarse croak, so low, Hyatt had to bend to hear the words. "Damned storm. Upset me, it did. Where's my cereal?" he wheezed pettishly.

"Right here, master," Hyatt said.

"Well, don't shout! I can hear you. Come on then and feed it to me. Want me to starve. Lately, you're not treating me so well."

"Sorry, master," Hyatt said, as he spooned the cereal into the other's mouth. Some of it dribbled out over Dabnis' chin. His mouth made sucking efforts to retrieve the mush but there was not enough strength in the lips. Hyatt wiped the other's face with a napkin when he was done feeding him.

"Looks like a fine day," Dabnis said. "This climate's too cold for an old man.

Take me out in the sun."

The smile in Hyatt's soul broadened until his heart almost burst for joy. The moment was coming. Soon . . .

The brook had overrun its banks. Hyatt saw that the water was fully three feet deep. Certainly enough for his purpose. The skinny, corded legs of the man perched on his shoulders kicked at him.

"Well, don't stand there all day. Take me across."

"Aren't you afraid I might slip, master?" Hyatt asked.

The man on his shoulders looked deeply into Hyatt's eyes and a strange smile played around the wrinkled, puckered lips.

"If you do," Dabnis said quietly, "I might drown. Then this cycle would end for me. And another would begin."

"Let it end, then!" Hyatt shouted in a triumphant voice. And dropped face downward into the brook. But just before he felt the water's closing, he heard the other's last words, "I shall meet you in the new, also, beast!"

* * *

"What do you make of it, sir?" the police sergeant asked.

The doctor lifted a startled face from his inspection of the bodies of Hyatt and Dabnis. His eyes held a disbelief. And his words set the sergeant wondering as to the other's sanity:

"The little one died . . . of old age. The other got caught, and how, I can't figure out, in the grip of the old man's legs. Why he was carrying him perched on his shoulders, is something that's got me stumped."

COMING NEXT MONTH:—

"SECRET OF THE SERPENT"

By DON WILCOX

THE GREAT NEW FANTASY NOVEL BY A GREAT WRITER!

PHEROS OF EGYPT



By JUNE LURIE



PHEROS was the king of Egypt many years ago, sometime during the 5th century B.C. He was one of the less warlike kings probably because of an accident which caused him to be blind. The river had risen to greater heights than it had ever before and all the land around was flooded. The king, angered by this condition, threw a spear into the midst of the stream, and immediately he had a disease of the eyes which caused him to be blind. For ten years he was blind and then an oracle came to him and

said that the time of his punishment had expired and that he could see again if he would wash his eyes with the water of a woman who had accompanied only with her husband. First he tried his own wife, and as he continued to be blind, he went out to try all women in turn. When he finally regained his sight, he gathered together all the women of whom he had made trial to one city, and burned them all up, including the city. Then he took as wife the woman by whose means he had regained his sight.

"LIFE-GIVERS"



By CARTER T. WAINWRIGHT



THE ancient name for pearl is "margan," which means "life-giver." In many parts of the world the pearl is associated with the mother goddess, or giver of life. In the northern mythology pearls, amber, and other precious stones were supposed to be congealed tears of the goddess Freyja, the Venus of the Scandinavians. A pearl found in a shell is regarded as especially sacred and as depositories of supernatural influence. In the Orient it is believed that pearls have medical properties, and that wearing them improves the texture and clearness

of the skin. In India the natives thought that the burnt powder of pearls, if taken with water, could cure hemorrhages and prevent evil spirits working havoc in the minds of men. The pearl and the moon were closely associated by the ancients. Because of its connection with the moon the pearl is supposed to shine at night. The symbolism of pearls is linked with that of the Mediterranean coral. These sacred things were supposed to contain the "life substance" of the mother goddess who had her origin in water and her dwelling in a tree. Coral was thought to be her sea tree.

CHINESE RAIN MAKERS



By H. R. STANTON



THE Chinese were quite confident that they could control the forces of nature. When rain was needed they made a huge wooden dragon to represent the rain god, and carried it around in a procession and hoped for rain. If no rain came, they tore the mock-dragon to pieces, and publicly deposed him from the rank of deity. If the rain came, he was promoted to a higher rank by an imperial decree. In the year 1710 the island of Tsong-ming was afflicted by drought. The viceroy of the province, after making all the usual attempts to bring the local deity around, sent word to the idol that if rain didn't come by the next day, he would turn him out of his temple and destroy it. This didn't seem to stir the deity as still no rain fell. The viceroy forbade the people to make any more offerings at the shrine of this cruel deity, and commanded them to seal the doors of the temple. This brought the deity around. When he was cut off from

his basic supplies, the idol had no choice but to let it rain. Thus the rain god was restored to the good graces of the faithful citizens.

In some parts of China, they produce rain or fair weather by opening the northern or southern gates of their cities. The south wind brings drought and the north wind brings showers, so by closing the south gates and opening the north gates you keep out the drought and admit rain. When you've had enough rain you close the north gates and open the south gates. I suppose this didn't always work, for in a time of drought, the rain god was chained and exposed to the incessant hot sun, so that he might feel the need for rain himself. When the Siamese wish for rain, they tie their idols in the sun, but if they want dry weather, they take the roofs off the temples and let it rain on the idols. This is supposed to inconvenience the idols till they grant the wishes of the people.



Herbert Coates lifted himself slowly from the box, knowing he was in a very tight spot

PERFUME for a PRINCESS

by ELROY ARNO

AS YOU entered the main research laboratories of Planetary Research, you walked more or less into the arms of Jeannie Adams. That is, if you didn't actually, you wished you had, when she looked up with those long lashed, violet eyes, studied you pleasantly and said:

"May I do something for you?"

Of course she didn't say that to Herbert Coates. As he held a position with Planetary Research, and not a very important one at that, Jeannie didn't even reserve a pleasant:

"Good morning."

Sometimes she didn't even look up. That gives one a fair impression of Herberts Coates' value on the feminine

**Coates searched vainly
for the Princess Lela — with
only her perfume for a guide**



allure market.

You were admitted through the swinging gate, very close to Jeannie's domain behind the switchboard. You stared around in amazement at the vast, multi-mirrored laboratories, so full of magnificent apparatus that it fairly shouted importance. You wandered down the vast corridor of Martian marble; staring at tall, good looking young men in white frocks. Here was science at work. Science personified and glorified, like a vast theatrical production.

White-clad assistants, most of them lovely, most of them very young, noted down your problems and ushered you to vast counsel rooms where you talked with His Nibs, Brigham Starr, the shining light of Planetary Research.

But, you are fortunate. Much more fortunate than Herbert Coates. Remember him? He's the man who walked into Planetary Research each morning for ten years.

There was reason for Jeannie to ignore Herbert Coates. Mr. Coates was one of those poor, lack-luster creatures who *asked* to be ignored. Asked it by his silent manner, his poor, ordinary clothes. He asked to be ignored until that morning he came into Planetary Research just five years ago today, wearing a new suit that fitted his slim body startlingly well, and brought to light certain qualities that had never been noticed previously.

But something happened *before* that morning. Something so fantastic—so startling, that it made a lifetime change in the habits of the man, Herbert Coates. It made other changes, also. Changes that can be stated modestly as having rocked the planet system. As having turned Brigham Starr's hair white overnight, and caused Jeannie Adams flip-flops of the heart from which she never quite recovered.

Herbert Coates lived an entirely normal life. His was not the glory of the spotless laboratories. Rather, Herbert Coates had been given a small drab office far to the rear of the great building that housed Planetary Research. In that office Mr. Coates followed this routine without variety, for ten long years.

Mr. Coates came into the office rather sleepily. That is, he appeared sleepy, for his mind was millions of miles away, figuring on some wild scheme to take treasure out of the Venusian swamps, of cleaning up a fortune in the head-hunting country of lower Neptune.

Both places were far from Mr. Coates. He had never seen them.

Mr. Coates, pursuing some dream serpent or fighting it out to the bitter end with an imaginary creature of the Venusian slime, would enter, hang his black coat and dark felt hat on the clothes hanger in the closet. He would wander to his desk, light a short stemmed, very black pipe, after tamping the tobacco into it gently and firmly. He would draw up the shade, clear his throat and sit down at his desk. For a period of perhaps ten minutes, Mr. Coates would pursue his daydream, squeezing from it every last episode of adventure that it contained.

Then his eyes would gradually focus on the tall stack of papers on his desk, his brain would lurch into focus with the humdrum world, and he would awaken with a start.

"Oh. Oh. Yes!"

No one was ever close enough to hear his exclamation. No one would have cared what he said.

Mr. Coates was chief shipping clerk for Planetary Research.

AT THIRTY, Coates was dried up inside like an old man. He read

his paper each night. He ate sparingly, mostly of soup and fish. He found a worn copy of some lavish adventure novel, settled down with it soon after eight in the evening and never stopped reading until long after respectable people were sleeping a dreamless sleep. Then Coates would smile softly, fold pages of his book together, knock out the ashes that had collected in his one and only pipe, and turn in. He quite often spoke the words out loud, for they gave him the feeling of being free to do as he wished. They gave him the thrill of doing something a little more exciting than just going to bed.

"Guess I'll turn in," he'd say. "Tomorrow is another day."

Yes—tomorrow was another day for Mr. Coates. Another—like all the rest of them.

With his reading, Coates had gathered an immense amount of data on things and places. He could quote every poet who had ever lived—and take it from him, there were a lot of them. He knew the sciences, the best prose—practically everything except what went on about him in everyday life.

And with his reading, he acquired nearsightedness, spectacles that he had to put on at once, upon arising, and discard carefully just before he pulled the cord that plunged his room into darkness.

Mr. Coates, quoting Jeannie Adams, of the Planetary Research switchboard, "Is an odd-dope. He lives kinda—inside himself."

So much for this extended description of Herbert Coates. If he's a dope, and Jeannie Adams thinks so, then he is. From what we hear of Jeannie, she *isn't* a dope. She's *sharp*. Plenty sharp.

But you forget. You forget that

rainy morning when Mr. Coates came in with the well pressed and brand new pin-stripe suit, *with a red carnation pinned very neatly in the lapel*.

It was just an ordinary evening in Mr. Coates' life. He left Planetary Research soon after five, said "Good evening" to Jeannie Adams, who was busy with a bit of mirror and a long pencil of lipstick. He couldn't have told you whether or not she acknowledged his parting words. Frankly, she didn't. Her mind was on a dinner date, and she didn't hear him. Mr. Coates passed slowly down Starr Drive, bought the evening "Tele-News" at the newsstand and hurried directly home. In the third floor room, a combination of kitchen, study and bedroom, Herbert Coates doffed his outer clothing, started the *Radionic heater* that fitted neatly into the wall, and placed a plate of dried halibut on the heater. He poured a certain percentage of water into the illum-burner, added tea and sat down to scan the paper.

AS USUAL, he passed lightly over the day's news, spent ten minutes reading an installment of a thing called "Headhunters of Mercury," gave it up in disgust, for it was hack material, laid the paper aside and prepared to eat. After dinner he dropped his few dishes into the patent "Clean-glass" washer, watched the suds whirl about the remnants of the halibut, washed them by applying the steam jet and left them to dry.

In his bedroom, Herbert Coates undressed quickly, folding his trousers neatly over the end of the bed, and prepared to stretch out with a new book.

Once comfortable, with the pillow folded neatly in the center and placed under his neck, he reached for the book.

and opened the cover. He was quite curious about this new find of his. First, because the title caught his eye.

THE FALL OF PRINCESS LELA

The title intrigued him, for he had never heard of Princess Lela. The book was very old (he had picked it up for a "fen" at one of the bookstalls).

The covers were brown and badly tattered. The title page, though rather yellow, was still clear.

He read the title page carefully, as he had a habit of doing. One of them caught his eye at once. It was the publication date. If he could believe the typesetter, the book was set up and printed by the Martian Press in the year of 2025, June fifth.

He reread the date again, glanced at the calendar on the wall and chuckled. According to that title page, he thought, this had gone to press only a week ago. With absolute certainty he recalled the present date as being June twelfth, 2025. Passing the whole thing off as an error on the part of the publishers, Mr. Coates started to read.

"The planet of Thon," the author said, "has reached a period of turmoil. As this account is written, the Princess herself is ready to flee from the Court of Clide and retreat into the hills with a few faithful followers."

Herbert Coates stopped reading abruptly, and tried to recall a planet, even little known, called Thon. Memory failed him. His forehead wrinkled slightly. So this was fiction, and not fact after all? His interest in the book lagged.

He picked up the narrative and read haltingly.

"Even before the mysterious fragrance of Lela's perfume had lifted from her rooms, Clide, the leader of the

uprising, had moved into the palace. Clide will have Lela hunted down as he would hunt an animal.

" 'She cannot escape,' Clide is said to have stated to his ministers. 'As long as Princess Lela is alive, the dogs of Clide will search for her.' "

Slow anger started to grow within Herbert Coates' chest. Fiction or fact, a man who hunted women with dogs should be stamped out—crushed like a snake.

More interested now, Herbert Coates read on. After a time, he adjusted the pillow again, kicked off his shoes and settled down for a long stay. Nine o'clock came and passed. Ten—eleven—twelve. At ten minutes to one he looked up, decided to read one more paragraph and stop.

"Princess Lela is still well loved by many of her people," the book said. "There are those who claim that even now, they can detect the odor of her violet perfumes drifting from the gardens of her palace. Perhaps, who knows, after these many years, Lela in all her color, will fade and die in the Mountains of Thon. Will her ghost return to haunt Clide? Will her heady perfumes, so well known to us all, drift about the halls of the court?"

HERBERT COATES put the book down reluctantly. Suddenly he had the darnedest feeling.

He sniffed the air. Only the odor of fish assailed his nostrils. *Was it only the fish?* The book had an immense power over him, he thought. *For an instant he had been positive that he had smelled the fresh, heady scent of violets.*

He smiled rather smugly. Who could live the lives of others as vividly as he? Who obtained such rare pleasure from . . . ?

He sniffed the air again, and his

heart seemed for a split second to stop beating.

The odor of violets was strong on the air.

He jumped from the bed and hurried to the open window. Leaning far out, he sniffed the night. Only the stench of the garbage burner arose from below. He closed the window and wandered into the kitchen. He was sure of it now. He was positive that the violet odor had spread through the entire apartment.

Shaking a little, he went back to the bed and picked up the book. Leafing through it hurriedly, he found the last page. He read:

"Lela will return to power. She has sworn it. She has faithful, powerful friends beyond the planet of Thon who she will call upon to help her. . . . Lela will overthrow Clide and rule our people. She has promised."

Then and only then did Coates drink the last of the cold tea and settle down, reading the book from cover to cover. He didn't try to escape the violet scent that hung so heavily over the room. It was as though he were being caressed by it—wrapped in its magic fragrance.

Close to five o'clock, he laid the book aside for the last time, looked at the clock and groaned—and rolled over to sleep.

The following morning, he did not arrive on time at Planetary Research. Herbert Coates was a changed man. A man who suddenly had a new reason for living. He wandered down Starr Boulevard, found a men's clothing store and entered. When he left, the violet perfume followed him closely, clinging to him, making him feel heady and intoxicated. He had discarded the plain black coat and the dark felt hat. Instead, he wore a well tailored pin stripe gray suit, a gray felt, sparkling

shoes and a maroon tie of distinctive good taste. His usual time for arrival at Planetary Research had been eight o'clock. This morning he entered those portals at exactly nine-fifteen.

Jeannie Adams looked up and continued to stare at him. Mr. Coates nodded pleasantly and said:

"Good morning, Jeannie."

Jeannie gulped out a reply and stared after him until he was out of sight around the bend of the corridor. She glanced at her watch. Then, startled, she remembered his greeting. This was the first time in ten years that Herbert Coates had ever called her anything but Miss Adams.

Jeannie noticed, alas, for the first time, that Mr. Coates had a nice face, hair that curled neatly across a well-shaped head, and a decent build that had been hidden these many years under the straight lines of the black coat.

Jeannie found her lipstick and mirror. She went to work with them.

Mr. Coates hung up his new suit-coat, adjusted his shirt sleeves above the elbows and sat down. He lighted the pipe with a certain dash, and went to work at once on the shipping invoices. Herbert Coates had a plan. The plan had grown slowly as the story of Princess Lela had been unfolded before his eager eyes. A plan that was so wild and so impossible that it had spurred him to action.

He scanned the shipping invoices speedily, finding one at last that suited his purpose. It read:

"One case Radionic parts—consigned to Mead's Outpost, West Rocket Course, Mercury."

That, thought Coates, is as far out as I can get on the regular lines. He shivered delightfully and looked at the invoice once more. His face was a bit pale and his fingers clutched the invoice very tightly as he arose and

went into the shipping room.

WE ADD no comment on the thoughts of his workmen, who had seen Mr. Coates as a dried up character for these many years, and who suddenly watched him emerge as a butterfly from a cocoon, in a neat new business suit.

They talked some among themselves. They walked circles around him to stay away from a character who had suddenly come to life from the mummy stage.

Mr. Coates found the shipment marked for Mead's Outpost. It was a heavy affair as he hoped it would be. He called an employee.

"Have this case placed in my office," he said. "I'll inspect it there. Valuable parts, you know." He raised an eyelid.

The man said:

"Sure—right away. Shipping it with tonight's consignment?"

Herbert Coates nodded.

"I may leave the office early. If I do, have it taken out in time for the Martian Relay."

The man nodded, and Mr. Coates returned to the office. He sat down and checked a long list, making it up as he went along. He stopped once in a while, sniffed the air and found the perfume still close.

At eleven thirty he arose, donned his coat, brushed lint from the sleeve, and folded the list he had been preparing so that it fitted neatly into his pocket.

At the switchboard he nodded politely to Jeannie Adams.

"Beautiful day?"

Jeannie arose, gave him her best smile, and said:

"Yes, going to lunch?"

If he was, she thought, this would be the first time he ever had anything but

sandwiches for lunch.

"Why, no!" Coates looked rather startled. "Just—going out for the air."

Jeannie was vaguely disappointed. He *might* have asked her to lunch. In fact, she had more or less planned on it.

"Oh!" she said, and sat down again.

Mr. Coates left Planetary Research and visited, during the lunch hour, a dozen supply stores. When he returned, he carried a large brown paper bundle. This time his face was drawn and a little white. A man with a purpose. He went directly to his office and closed the door. He locked it. He saw the big box, now in the center of the floor, and went to work with his tools, loosening the top.

An hour later Herbert Coates had placed the Radionic supplies neatly on the shelves in his closet. He had written a letter of resignation to Mr. Starr, and was resting comfortably on a bed of packing floss at the bottom of the box. He had bored a neat row of holes along the bottom of the box, and the package he had purchased lay beside him on the packing floss. He glanced at his watch. Twenty to six. Jeannie Adams and the office staff had left. In five minutes Herbert Coates would be lifted carefully — "Fragile — Handle With Care," and be carried to the delivery truck at the rear of the building. He had on hand one space-helmet, glassite type—several cans of food pills—a flash-pistol (range seventy rods for killing) ammunition—a pair of boots and a strong leather belt and holster.

In half an hour he was scheduled (or rather one case of Radionic parts were) to be flung into space aboard one of the Martian Relay rocket ships, in the direction of Mead's Outpost, West Rocket Course, Mercury.

Mr. Coates sighed. He had often

dreamed of plans like this. This time he had the strength of a certain agent behind him. An agent so strong that it beckoned Herbert Coates to the one adventure of his life.

The agent? A heady perfume of violets, stronger than ever now in the confines of the box. The perfume of adventure, calling him to the side of a lovely Princess.

FOR, make no mistake, Lela *was* a magnificent woman. Coates had found that out to his full satisfaction in the course of reading the book.

Several times before the box was carried out, Mr. Coates had vague misgivings. He even wondered if perhaps he wasn't a little mad. He shrugged, for weren't *all* adventurers a little crazy? If not, how could they set out against such tremendous odds, following a will-o'-the-wisp to glory?

"Will-o'-the-wisp," Mr. Coates whispered to himself. "Well, guess I'll turn in."

Repeating this familiar phrase, he felt better. He rolled over on his side and closed his eyes. The perfume lulled him, and he slept.

Jarvis Mead was rough cut, with muscles that would have made his shirt bulge, if he chose to wear a shirt. Clad in shorts, helmet (which he detested wearing), and carrying a short handled hatchet, he entered the storeroom and surveyed the new shipment.

"Hotter'n hell," Mead said to himself. No air in the place. He flung a door open, took a long disgusted look out at the dusty plain and turned to his work. He drew a list of parts from his pocket.

- Item 1—Seven large tubes—Type V
- 2—Sixteen assorted ammunition clips
- 3—Vita-ray health lamp
- 4—One box Radionic parts

Item four was it. He needed the parts. Communication with his trading outposts had reached an all-time low. No radios in condition. He attacked the box with vigor. He drew up the cover and swore.

"What the devil?"

Herbert Coates, his head carefully encased in space helmet, sat up. He grinned shyly at Mead. Through the mouth-visor came the greeting Mr. Coates had been thinking of for the past hour, since the last time his box had bumped gently and stayed put.

"I'm Herbert Coates. I can explain . . ."

To put it mildly, Jarvis Mead was outraged. His face turned several shades redder than necessary.

"The devil you can. How long since Planetary Research started sending out explanations in human form, instead of the stuff I order?"

Mr. Coates was out of the box now, a little wobbly on his feet.

"I—I had to get here somehow. I didn't have the money for the trip. We'll notify Planetary Research. I'm sure they'll . . ."

Mr. Mead was beginning to understand that he had a stowaway, via Rocket Express. That the stowaway was a rather thin, tired looking man, and in choosing this method of travel, the thin guy had guts to trust his carcass in a packing box for a trip of several million miles.

"Look here," Mead said abruptly. "I don't know whether you're crazy or not, but you *must* be well beaten up and half starved. Come along. The old lady will fix something."

Herbert Coates sighed. It had been much easier than he thought. He followed Mead across the vast warehouse, through the air lock and into a large living room. The place was neat. It, Coates observed, must feel a woman's

touch, for every book was in place in the shelves, each pot of flowers well tended. Mead ripped the helmet from his head and wiped perspiration from his face. The face was big, strong and still red.

He called:

"Martha, we got a visitor, via Rocket Express."

Mr. Coates removed his helmet also. He was tired—very tired. He took the chair offered him and stared out the window toward the red, barren hills. A woman came in. She was short, heavy set, and had a motherly smile.

"My goodness," she said. "I'm glad to meet you."

She stopped short.

"*Jarvis Mead!*" she said with sudden amazement. "*You said this gentleman came by Rocket Express?*"

Mead was seated now, a curve stemmed pipe in his mouth. He was staring at Coates.

He nodded gravely.

"But—Rocket Express carries only freight. There's no passengers . . . ?"

Mead smiled.

"Herbert Coates," he said wryly, "*is* freight. He came from Earth in a packing case."

It was Mrs. Mead's turn to stare now.

"I—I don't understand?"

"I—I must explain," Herbert Coates said. "You see, I've been working for Planetary Research for ten years. I never managed to save much. When this trip became—necessary—I had no choice."

"Coates came in the packing box that was supposed to contain Radionic parts for the outposts," Mead said dryly. "I'm not certain whether we own him now or not. I ordered something and got someone. Why he chose Mead's Outpost to include in his trav-

els, has me stumped."

Martha Mead was a matter-of-fact woman. She didn't question anything. After the crazy stunts Jarvis had pulled during the last twenty years, no one—nothing—surprised Martha.

"You poor man," she told Coates. "You're going to have a square meal. After that, Jarvis Mead can talk all he wants to. You must be half starved and—and all battered to pieces."

Herbert Coates felt as though he might fit that description. He thanked his stars that the end of his first journey had proven not only bearable but actually pleasant.

He liked Martha Mead, and although Jarvis Mead seemed a bit hard and sarcastic, he hoped they would get along together.

During dinner Mr. Coates thought a great deal. What was he going to do next? Where was he going next?

"Yes," he'd smile pleasantly, hearing only half the questions Mrs. Mead tossed at him during the meal. "Yes, furs are the height of style this year."

Coates, you're a fool. Where to next? You're after a will-o'-the-wisp.

"Yes, yes, of course. Everyone—that is the richer classes, are spending the year at the new baths on Mars. They're already famous for the type of youth-water found there."

Pursuit of Lela, Coates thought. He had chosen Mead's Outpost because it was the farthest point "out" from earth. (That is, the farthest point served by the regular lines.)

He was vaguely aware that Mead sent a dozen or so trade ships beyond, and that was why he had come. Coates wanted to take one of those ships—and go so far as he could get beyond the regular trails of the rocket lines. He wanted to get to—well, admit it, Coates. He wanted to get to Thon, the planet where Lela lived and fought.

Yet, Thon was uncharted. It wasn't even shown on the maps.

"Hey, Coates," Jarvis Mead was saying. "Wake up. You've been day-dreaming."

Coates started, then sank back in his chair with a smile. Mr. and Mrs. Mead were both staring at him.

"I—I was thinking, Mr. Mead. Would you—could you give me passage on one of your ships—beyond here?"

Mead's face was suddenly frozen. All of the reluctant friendliness went out of it. His voice was a little harsh.

"Where you going?"

Martha Mead said:

"Now, Jarvis, don't you . . .?"

Mead ignored her.

"Where you going?" he repeated.

Herbert Coates was cornered. He had the feeling that he had overstepped. He had talked too much, for knowing so little of Mead. Still, Coates was not a man to lie. It seemed to him right now, that it might not be healthy to lie to Mead.

"I—that is—have you ever heard of the Planet of Thon?"

Did he fancy that Mead's face turned a trifle pale?

Mead's voice seemed thicker when he answered.

"Thon? No such place. Never heard of it, and my ships touch most of the outlands. No, Coates, you're evidently on the wrong track. I suggest you take the supply ship out day after tomorrow. I won't report you to the space authorities. I'll give you a clean slate when you leave here."

Mead stared thoughtfully at the table.

"Get out, Coates, and don't come back this way. This is no country for a man like you. You're not up to it."

For a time all were silent. Coates felt sick and shaky. His whole ad-

venture was breaking up almost before he started. Still, he was sure that the name Thon wasn't entirely strange to Mead. Mead had a reason for getting rid of him.

Yet, Mead was a good guy, Coates thought. Good—but rough and determined. Mrs. Mead arose.

"I'll show you to your room, Mr. Coates," she said. Her voice was very quiet—friendly. "I think Jarvis is right. You don't look too strong. I'd get out of Mead's Outpost and back where people live—civilized."

He said goodnight to Jarvis Mead and followed Martha Mead up the flight of stairs to his room. At the head of the stairs, Coates hesitated and looked back. Jarvis Mead was still smoking. He was staring out the window, a frown on his dark face.

HERBERT COATES couldn't sleep.

Gradually, inside him, a new courage started to make itself felt. He tossed about on the comfortable bed, the odor of the wild perfume strong in his nostrils. The stuff affected his mind, his body, his very soul. It made him stronger—more determined.

Coates was angry. Angry at himself for allowing everyone to overrule every plan he conceived. It had always been this way. It seemed to Coates that during his entire life he had always been at his best when saying such things as:

"Sorry, sir, it won't happen again," or "I know I was wrong. I'll try to do better. Yes, sir, thanks for the advice."

Why? Why, because he was a soft touch—a thin, weak man, whom no one paid any attention to. A man who never had an idea or conviction of his own.

That attitude toward life had to stop—right now.

"Wham."

The explosion lighted the night, making the prairie beyond Coates' bedroom window light up almost like day. Coates shot out of bed as though the devil were after him. He stood shivering in the center of the floor, for the night was cold at Mead's Outpost. Then, his fluttering heart growing more steady, he moved toward the window and stared down at the sand stretched out before him.

He sighed with relief.

The sound had been no more than a speedy freighter, probably one of Mead's, flashing in for a landing. Mead was out there now, a small figure against the night, running toward the ship. Coates saw a man get out, and Mead shook hands with him. They were talking, but the distance was too great for Coates to hear. His eyes were on the freighter, a slim tube built for speed, and carrying sixteen jets. He liked the lines of that ship. Even before the IDEA came into his head, he had unconsciously approved of the ship.

The IDEA came slowly. He wasn't sure he could handle the IDEA, even though it meant a way out. If he *couldn't* handle the IDEA, then he was lost. He would be sent back to the main rocket route from the Base Landing, and in ten days would be back home, getting the devil from Brigham Starr for substituting himself for a case of valuable parts.

Suddenly Coates detested himself for not having more courage. Shivering partly from cold, partly from something that disgusted him, he dressed. His helmet was near the bed. His space gun and supplies were still in the warehouse. He crept down the steps slowly, for Mead and his man had long since disappeared from the plain and were evidently in conference,

or had retired. Carefully he slipped through the house, donned his helmet, went through the air-lock and into the warehouse.

Almost instantly he knew he had walked right into it.

He heard voices, and saw a faint light moving toward him from the far end of the big room. Coates ducked behind the packing case where he had hidden for the trip, and waited.

He heard Mead speak:

"Good trip. You did okay, Harry."

He heard the other say:

"Thanks, Jarvis. Say, we need those parts, though. If I'da got in a jam, I couldn't have called you if I'd wanted. Screen is busted all to pieces."

They had passed Coates' hiding place now and Mead was fumbling with the door that led directly into the house.

He swore.

"Yes," he said. "And there's a nasty joke behind *that*, too. I had a case of stuff ordered. When it got here, there was a stowaway in the box. Now we wait another three days for the supplies."

The man Mead called Harry cursed loudly.

"Stowaway by Express?"

Mead said: "Yeah, I could have killed the guy at first. Not a bad sort, though. Martha liked him."

"But—where was he headed for? What's the idea?"

Harry sounded puzzled.

Mead laughed shortly.

"Don't have to worry your head about *this* guy. He might have the brains but not the guts. Thin, anemic little wart. Searching for adventure. I'm sending him back day after tomorrow—on the supply ship. He'll go like a sheep. Come to think about it—he reminds you of a sheep. Gentle as a lamb, and no *guts*."

HERBERT COATES felt sick—he felt sick all the way through. They were gone now and for a while at least he was safe.

So he reminded Mead of a sheep, did he? No guts? No, he admitted to himself, he wasn't cut out for adventure. Still, he'd started this thing, and he was going through with it.

With new courage he searched in the darkness and found the holster and pistol. He donned the heavy boots. For a long time he waited in the shadows of the house, then when all seemed dark and safe, he ran swiftly across the open sand toward the ship.

He reached the hatch, opened it swiftly, and dove inside like a frightened rabbit diving into its hole. He found the steps by groping for them in the darkness and crept up to the control room.

Braver now, he pushed the door open and froze against the inside of it.

A hairy, bare-chested giant stood in the middle of the room, staring at him with an amused grin.

"I been watching you for fifteen minutes, out the vise-screen," the giant said. "What do you think you're doing, Rabbit?"

Something snapped inside of Herbert Coates like the bow string on a tightly strung bow. An immense anger filled him. He stood there straight and quiet, thinking of all the times he had backed down and given up without a fight. He drew his pistol and pointed it waveringly toward the big man's chest. He said in a wavery voice:

"Take one step, and I'll shoot."

It seemed at that moment as though the violet perfume grew stronger and filled his head with its wine. He stood there not knowing what to do next.

The giant regarded him with a perplexed smile.

"Look here, Sonny; you ain't getting away with anything."

Coates said nothing. He was thinking fast now. Could he run the ship? Was it the general type displayed at Planetary Research? He knew about them. He had taken a complete course in navigation, piloting and minor points—by mail order. His eyes darted toward the control board, and he smiled.

Usual type, wheel controlled—straight jet power.

"Give me that gun. *You might hurt someone.*"

Coates' eyes, partly on the giant, partly studying the cabin, went cold. He was angry all the way through now—and he felt his blood as though it were suddenly red hot.

"I said I'd shoot you down and . . ."

The big man leaped forward, grabbing at Coates' wrist. The gun went off. A roaring flame flashed across the darkened width of the cabin. The giant sank down on the floor, his eyes wide, face mirroring his bewilderment. He was holding his hand, badly burned by the gun.

"*I didn't think you had the guts.*"

To Herbert Coates the man didn't seem angry—just amazed.

"Shut up," Coates said evenly. "Get over there and sit down."

He motioned toward the dual chair at the controls. The giant moved quickly for his size, his eyes still on the gun.

"Anything you say, half pint, only when Jarvis Mead gets you . . ."

Alarmed, Coates glanced sidewise toward the house. He could see lights coming on. The front door opened.

Coates found the coil of anchor rope in the corner and tied the man up swiftly. He had hardly finished when Jarvis Mead started pounding on the outer hatch of the ship.

"Hey, Skip, what goes on in there?"

The man beside Coates started to answer. Coates poked the gun into his ribs, and Skip was silent. Coates opened the light switch, and the ship was awash of bright colors. A huge spot cut the night ahead, lighting the entire area around the house.

"Hey, you, Skip. What goes on?"

There was alarm in Mead's voice. He was pounding on the air-lock with both fists.

Coates seated himself and reached for the jet-release lever.

"Thanks, Mr. Mead," he called. He was grinning—a little happily, he confessed to himself. For the first time in his life he was giving orders and doing exactly as he pleased. "Thanks for everything. I'll try to get the ship back safely."

A moment of silence, then:

"It's you—Coates?" Amazement was reflected in Mead's voice. "Get out of there. You can't fly that thing. You'll kill yourself."

Coates laughed a little grimly.

"It may sound melodramatic, but I'd rather die here than go back and face the smug smile of Jeannie Adams."

It didn't make sense to Mead, and Coates knew it didn't.

"What the devil?"

"Get out of the way, Mead. I don't want you hurt when I take off."

IN THE next chair Skip was fighting with the ropes. His face was pale, and he was panting, working the muscles of his huge arms.

"If you're in there, Skip, for God's sake stop that poor fool."

Mead's voice was pathetic with worry.

"Skip isn't stopping anything right now," Coates shouted. "Out of the way, Mead. I'll be seeing you."

"Wait! You asked me about Thon?"

Coates seemed suddenly caught in suspended animation. He moved no muscle. He waited.

"Are you listening, Coates?"

"I'm listening," Coates said. Beads of perspiration stood out on his face. The odor of violets was stronger at this moment than ever before. He saw the vision of Lela.

"Then take heed," Mead called. "If you're thinking of looking for that death-infected ball of hell, change your mind, Coates. If you live to get off this planet, remember what I say. If you want to fly the shortest route to hell, set your course at XY40—ZL-20—and fly beyond the flat circle. That's all, Coates, and pleasant journey. To hell with you."

Coates hesitated, then pulled the jet lever back as far as it would go. For an instant he swore that his neck was being yanked from his shoulders. All the breath inside him was crushed out in a sudden painful sigh. The sand below him, Mead's Outpost, all of it jerked abruptly out of sight.

"Beyond the flat-circle—the shortest route to hell."

Those words kept flashing before his eyes as though posted there on a revolving sign post.

"The shortest route to hell . . ."

He looked around at the man at his side, and for the first time a feeling of pride filled him. During the take-off, although it had punished his body terribly, he had been wide awake and alert. Skip, big, brutal Skip, was blacked out. His head had tipped forward, lips white. His eyes were closed tightly.

Coates made a note of the message Mead had given him. In a way, he thought, I can thank Mead for that. He doesn't entirely dislike me or he wouldn't have told me where to fly. He's testing me, sort of. He doesn't

think I've got the guts to do it.

He thought about that for a long time.

Then he leaned forward and set the cross-hairs on the dead-reckoning navigation instrument.

The cross-hairs indicated a course to the bull's-eye on XY40-ZL-20. Coates removed his wrinkled coat and rolled up his sleeves. He thought he must look a little better now. Better equipped, that is, to face . . .

Skip was waking up. He lifted his head slowly and regarded Coates with a mixture of surprise and sullen admiration.

"Looks like you made it," he said grudgingly.

Coates smiled.

"Read a book about these things once," he said, as though that settled any argument.

Skip sighed.

"You're crazy," he said. "Anyhow, I'm here, and it don't look as though I'm leaving for a while. Where we going?"

The smile twitched Coates' lips slightly. His eyes squinted against the darkness ahead. His chin had molded itself in these last few minutes into something a little more determined and square.

"According to the best authorities," he thought of Mead, "you and I are following the shortest route to hell. Good luck to us, Skip. If Mead is right, we'll need it."

Skip was silent for fifty seconds. Then he turned once more. His eyes were twinkling.

"You'll need it, all right," he said. "You better get me untied before we hit the barrier reef. I don't care much what happens to you, but what hits one of us hits the other, so to speak. I value my own hide too much to do anything drastic right now."

IT MADE sense, and Herbert Coates was beginning to realize that he might need help—lots of it.

He locked the controls and reached for the ropes that bound the hulking Skip.

With the freighter controls locked on course, Herbert Coates helped Skip bandage his hand. Skip, oddly enough, seemed to feel pretty decently toward Coates.

"You're just crazy enough to try something like this," Skip told him. "Funny how a little guy gets his dander up and kicks over the traces."

Coates didn't answer. Although Skip seemed friendly, Coates kept his pistol loose in his belt, ready to grasp it if Skip showed any sign of hostility.

"Where'd you come from?" Skip asked. "What was the idea of running out on Mead that way?"

Coates said:

"If I told you, you'd say I was nuts. You'd say I didn't have a chance."

Skip thought about that for a while. He sat down, his bandaged hand on his knee, eyes bright, centered on Coates.

"I ain't sure of that," he said. "You know I heard what Jarvis Mead said to you, back there at Mead's Outpost."

Coates put the bandages away and went back to the control board.

"Yes?" He was stalling for time. Trying to sound out Skip. The big man had something on his mind.

"Yeah!" Skip said. "About Thon, and the queer way he helped you out by giving you the proper bearings."

Coates remained silent, and Skip scratched the heavy stubble on his chin. He frowned.

"How did you hear of Thon?"

Coates caught his breath.

"I—I, that is, I heard Mead talking about it."

Skip chuckled.

"You're a liar," he said. "Mead never talked about Thon because Mead didn't even know the name of the planet."

Coates sighed. He couldn't tell Skip the truth. Skip would laugh.

He didn't dare trust Skip—not yet.

"Mead knew about the Bright Planet, beyond the charted system," Skip said. "We heard about it but we didn't dare go beyond the flat-circle. The route is so full of trouble that we go a thousand miles around to avoid touching it."

His eyes gleamed.

"You know why I didn't pound the devil out of you? You know why I'm sitting here talking like old friends instead of heading this ship back for Mead's Outpost?"

Coates grinned.

"Because I'd shoot you down."

Skip shook his head slowly from side to side.

"I been shot by better marksmen than you," he said. "Once I got sixteen spots of steel and a couple of fire burns, all in the guts. I was up and around in a month."

He sighed.

"Nope—not that. I kinda like you. I wanted Mead to try to get through to the Bright-planet. Then, out on the barrier reefs near the flat-circle, I picked up a lost pilot. He was dying. He'd tried to make a trip through the reef and piled up his crate. Before he died, he pointed to the Light-planet and called it "Thon." He said just two words. "Thon—riches."

Skip grinned.

"When you know me better, you'll know that that *last* word is enough to make me start out willingly on what Mead always called the short route to Hell."

Coates, feeling triumphant in a sense, and frightened in spite of it, wondered

how much he could tell.

"So," Skip went on, "You're the second guy who ever called the Bright-planet Thon. There's some connection, and I'm sticking with you until I find out what it is. Maybe you don't know much about it, but I'm going to try to get through the barrier reef with you, *just in case*."

HERBERT COATES rose and walked around the cabin a couple of times. Skip said no more. He was waiting. At last Coates stopped walking. He looked Skip in the eye.

"I can't tell you anything—yet. If I'm *not* crazy, and I don't think that I am, I probably know more about Thon than anyone else. You play square with me, and if there is a fortune in it, you'll get more than your share. I guess that's how it will have to be for a while. Share and share alike, and hope for the best."

Skip grinned. He took Coates' hand and squeezed it tightly.

"My full name's Skipper Neelson," he said. "Skip is okay with me, if you feel like having it that way."

"Skip it will be," Coates said. "Mine is Herbert Coates."

"Good," Skip said. "From now on, it will be Skip and Herb. Okay with you?"

That was the first time anyone had ever called him "Herb," and it sure sounded good.

"That's the barrier reef," Skipper Neelson said, and pointed ahead, on course, at the menacing wall of rotating, grinding asteroids, "Like I said, a few men got through it. None came back. I tried once."

Skip sighed.

"I dunno. Guess we only die once, and if you know what you're doing . . . ?"

Suddenly Herbert Coates remem-

bered something he had read in the strange little book. He wished fervently that he dared take the book from his pocket and refer to it.

He stared ahead. The void was suddenly full of tiny asteroids, and the freighter was sliding in among them. The day was dark with dust. The main barrier lay ahead.

Skip sat down at the controls.

"This is going to take both of us," he said. "Remember what you said—wish us luck? Well, here's *where* we need it."

The book—Coates was thinking desperately.

"The Outsider cannot reach Thon. The secret is hidden from them. The bearing should be changed ten degrees each ten minutes, bearing steadily toward the flat-circle. The channel is narrow."

The words—or the memory of them, were crystal clear in Coates' mind for a brief instant. Without conscious thought he snapped out orders to Skip.

"Change our course ten degrees toward the flat-circle.

Skip glanced out of the corner of his eye.

"So you do know more than you have been telling. I had a hunch . . ."

His voice faded away. He changed the cross-hairs slightly, and the freighter veered away, straight into the heart of the mass of asteroids.

The main mass of asteroids were close now. Almost solid, grinding together, narrow channels between them. Coates flipped the rudder control again slightly. He thought he had the idea all right. The reef wasn't as solid as it looked. If by changing the course every ten minutes, he could find a channel through . . . ?

He was conscious of Skip's voice again.

"For a little guy you got nerve."

SWEAT stood out on Coates' forehead. He couldn't tell Skip that this was the first time he had ever taken a chance in his life—that he was depending on a strange little book tucked away inside his pocket. Still, the closer they plowed into the main reef, the stronger was the odor of that violet scent. The nearer he was to Lela.

They were into the thing badly now, and chunks of ragged metal hit the snout of the freighter, growling and scraping along its metallic length, to fall into the rocket wash behind.

Ten Minutes.

"Change the course again—same amount," Coates said.

All the muscles in his body were tightened up and aching. His mouth was strangely dry.

"Changed, Herb," Skip said, and pride swelled inside Coates.

If Skip only knew how much it meant to him to be called by a simple, every day nickname.

Herb and Lela, he repeated to himself, and color tinged his pale face.

"There ought to be a channel through here someplace," he said after another ten minutes. "Change course again."

They were rushing along almost parallel to the main barrier now. Behind them the void was darkened, thick with smaller asteroids. Beside them, the foreboding dark wall.

Wall?

Coates' eyes picked up the channel. There it was, tiny, far away, with the brightness of light coming from the far side.

"There," he pointed with a shaking hand. "There it is. Change course every ten minutes. It worked. It worked."

Skip swiftly aimed the freighter at the hole through the reef. Skip was

cussing under his breath. Cussing with admiration for the slim man who had seen them into the middle of the Hell-reef and was now pointing the way through to freedom.

They shot through, scraping the tail rocket against the impassable reef, feeling the tubes push them ahead with renewed speed. Then—dazzling brilliance. A sky of rainbow hue. Colors massed in profusion, changing. The flat-circle lay dead ahead.

To Herbert Coates the flat-circle was something he had read about in a book. To Skip it was like a sudden look at Heaven.

It whirled in the void, multi-colored, made up of strange, unknown gasses. It whirled like a huge halo of color, a thousand miles across, changing into a whirlpool, the outer circle of a thousand hues, the inner, narrowing down until it became a madly girating abyss of deep blue.

And they were here alone. Here on the far side of the barrier-reef in a new universe.

Skip glanced back nervously.

"How the hell did you know where to come through . . .?"

Coates didn't dare look back. Nothing but help from another—stronger force had seen him through. Help—he dared hope—from Lela.

"We've—come a long way."

Skip chuckled.

"Okay," he said. "I had a hunch you were the guy to ride with. Where do we go now?"

Coates studied the colored sky ahead.

"I don't . . ."

He stopped short. He had been about to confess that he didn't know. That would never do. At all costs Skipper Neilson had to think that he, Coates, knew every inch of this strange world.

"We've got to steer a course across the top of the flat-circle toward the Bright-planet, or Thon," he said. He hoped that his voice sounded matter of fact. He had no idea where Thon might lie.

The book did not mention the exact location of Thon. He remembered one vague reference made. He racked his mind trying to draw from it that precious line of instructions.

"To approach Thon, the Outsider must first cross the flat-circle. It will be impossible to miss Thon by following these instructions."

That sounded strange. Very strange. The whole thing was frightening.

He took the controls from Skip, and the big man sat back, his eyes fixed on Coates' face.

"Think we'll run into any trouble?"

Coates wanted to tell him that trouble was a thing they would probably meet in considerable amounts. Instead he smiled.

"You wouldn't take candy away from a baby, would you?"

Skip laughed.

"I get it. There's gold in them there rainbows, but it has to be dug out the hard way. Okay, Captain, let's get at it."

COATES took a deep breath, brought the ship around and headed straight out into the rainbow pattern toward the edge of the whirlpool of color. He felt great thermal drafts touch them lightly, sending them up and down at will. There were winds out there, he thought. Bad winds. He knew something about up-drafts. He'd read a lot about them in airmen's manuals.

The freighter responded slowly to his touch. It ploughed out over the whirlpool in void, and Coates, struggling hard with the controls, could hear

his own breath coming harder as they moved onward against great resistance.

He heard Skip chuckle. It was a dry, humorless sound.

"I hope you know what you're doing."

Coates didn't answer. He had only one thing to guide him now. That one thing was the fragile violet smell that had become cloying in its sweetness. It hung about him so closely now that he could close his eyes and see the image of Lela standing before him.

A great downdraft sucked at them. He leaned back in the chair, pulling the nose of the ship upward.

The downdraft took hold, and the freighter tipped forward and slid swiftly down, straight toward the center of the whirlpool.

"Hey—we gotta get out . . ."

He knew Skip was frightened now. Frightened as he was.

"Give me—some—help."

Then Skip was fighting the controls with him, and Coates felt his neck and back muscles ache with the force that fought against them both.

Skip was panting.

"Get this thing outa here."

"I'm trying," Coates said desperately.

Down—down.

They were traveling faster now, pulled onward by the winds. Pulled by the same whirlpool that sucked the color into the bottomless pit of blue.

The colors whirled madly before them. Green-violet-yellow, then yellow—blue.

Blue came last, when all other shadows had faded to nothingness, and the freighter was a tiny struggling speck sucked straight into the great dark pool.

Coates could feel his shoulders fairly tearing loose—his eyes bulged. He felt beads of perspiration ooze from his

body and soak his shirt.

He dared glance at Skip. Skip was staring at him—his eyes wide—pleading for help—for reassurance.

Coates smiled faintly.

"Mother of God," Skip's lips were muttering something. Something too low to be heard.

The blue melted in about them, and they had to drop the controls, for the pressure was too great to hold. The rocket jets kicked off automatically. In an instant the ship was deadly silent, rolling end over end, out of control.

The wheels snapped forward against the panel and broke. Only the straps held them in place. The freighter sank into the great pool, and the inside of the cabin was filled with blue as though they had fallen into the lowest pit of the deepest sea.

In the great silence that engulfed them, Coates heard Skip still muttering, groaning as though something terrible had happened to his body.

At that same instant a great pain shot through Coates, seeming to electrify his entire body. It tingled and burned at him, making him writhe in pain.

He tried to cry out.

"Lela—I—help . . ."

The blue turned black, and he knew no more.

"BEFORE he entered the realm," a voice said, "he called the name of Lela."

Herbert Coates was aware of the voice, though it seemed to come from far away, and he didn't connect it with himself or what was happening. Just what *was* happening? To begin with, he felt drunk. He felt as he had once or twice when he dared to drink more than three beers at Peter's Tavern on Lincoln Avenue.

His head whirled around, and his thoughts, in fact everything about him, seemed to revolve in an intense grouping of color.

It was as though he suddenly lived in a new world of technicolor. Remember, he thought dully, how, after you had seen a technicolor film, everything outside the theater seemed dull—sort of white and black?

The voice came again—or was it a different one?

"How would an Outsider know about Lela?"

Hell, Coates thought to himself, I know *all* about Lela. I *love* Lela.

"Listen," he said aloud. "I'm Herbert Coates. I came to . . ."

He stopped short. He had come to . . . to what? Why *had* he come actually? Had he come because a perfume had beckoned? That was no good reason. Had he come to help Lela? How? How could a little run-of-the-mill guy like him help a Princess who had lost her throne?

"The Outsider talks riddles," another voice said.

He opened his eyes. He closed them again, blinked rapidly several times and was able to keep them open. The place was a forest like one of those green, intensely colorful forests in a Travelogue. The kind of Travelogue where a voice says, "And now we leave the colorful hills of the great west and journey across the top of the world to . . ."

Nuts, Coates thought. This isn't real.

He was in a clearing. A clearing surrounded by greens and blues and browns so bright that they seemed to need toning down to make them real. Two people stood before him.

Were they people?

They had two legs each and two arms. They were dressed in loosely

fitted white robes. But the hands, one of them pointing to him even now, weren't hands at all. They were sharp, black claws. The feet were not shod. They were claws also, digging into the earth where they stood. The faces—? He stared at the faces with newborn disgust.

Faces that weren't faces at all. Black, diseased hunks of flesh with green, watery eyes, a red gash of mouth and no nose at all—just two holes in the mud-clot of face.

Coates hugged the ground where he lay. He looked around and saw two objects that brought reality back to him sharply.

Skip—stretched out on the brown earth, was staring at him with awed, dilated eyes. Fifty yards away the freighter lay on its side, to all appearances intact, the hatch broken open, the plasti-glass windows gone, almost as if they had simply melted, vanished completely.

Coates sat up. His hand rested on his holster, bringing out the gun slowly.

The two odd-looking creatures edged close to him.

"No weapons, Outsider. We do not permit their use here."

There was intelligence in that voice, Coates thought. Intelligence and cunning. His hand crept away from the pistol. He stood up. Skip, evidently waiting for him to set an example, arose also.

Coates said:

"We had an accident."

One of the pair of creatures said: "You seek our Princess?"

Dared he hope that he had actually been summoned? He had come because the perfume had haunted him, drawn him here. Yet, to find out that he was expected.

"I—I have been seeking the violet perfume," he said.

HE KNEW that Skip was watching him closely now. Watching for some sign that Coates was still following a designated course—doing something with a purpose.

The two creatures talked to each other, ignoring his presence. One of them said:

"The perfume of Lela?"

Coates nodded.

"I followed the scent of the violets," he said.

One of the creatures chuckled.

"Then the Outsider *is* expected. Lela has summoned him."

He motioned toward the forest.

"Tell your servant to come with you."

For many hours they pursued a steady course down across the many pine-clad hills, through small villages toward the valley.

Coates could see the valley ahead of them during almost the entire trip. He saw it and watched it grow larger with a newborn fear growing in his own heart.

Each person they met on the trail—each woman and child in the many villages, was malformed and ugly, as were his guides. The claw-like limbs, the dark terrible faces. Only the voices were gentle and addressed him with respect.

Skip, at his side, said:

"So this is Thon?"

"I guess so."

"You *guess*? Look here, Herb, if we're going to be pals, I've got to trust you. Dammit man, you haven't made a move yet that didn't indicate you knew just what you were doing. I don't get it. I don't get it at all."

Coates sighed.

"Neither do I," he said.

The valley was wonderful. That is, it looked wonderful. Its towers were rainbow towers, touching the clouds.

Its highways were smooth, wide, and of many colors. It was like being dipped into a rainbow. It was like taking the mists away from your eyes, after they had seen only black and white all your life, and suddenly saturating yourself—drowning in color.

The guides did not talk to him. From their conversations with the people of the villages, Coates knew that these men had been stationed in the hills. That they had waited for many days until he had come.

And what of Lela?

Coates was frightened.

This was a different Thon than he had expected. He remembered reading once that to an elephant another elephant was lovely. Wasn't it possible that among these people, these clawed animals, there were standards of beauty?

Perhaps these monstrosities who guided him to Lela's province were handsome when gauged by Thon standards.

The idea shook his faith in Lela.

Had he journeyed over Mead's shortest route to hell, only to find an ugly Princess?

THE building was the finest of them all. It sent delicately wrought shafts of golden plastic upward into the sky. The gates, carved of cobalt marble, swung open, and peeling bells made the place alive with pleasing sound.

Coates stumbled forward across a court, up endless steps and into a great rainbow room. Skip, panting with excitement, was near him. Skip's lips were moving endlessly, whispering the same words over and over.

"Towers of gold—towers of gold."

Coates wanted to tell Skip to shut up. The guides stepped behind him now, and he stumbled ahead. A giant

whirlpool of color hit him. The bells tinkled. Every shade of the spectrum was there, and he feasted his eyes on color. It was as though he was drunk, and he fell forward on his knees, looking up, trying to detect something—anything normal in the swirling pool of light.

Then he saw *her*.

Herbert Coates, the Outsider, had come this impossible span of miles to see a woman described in a book. Had come to his Princess Lela. And Lela stood before him.

Stood?

He wasn't sure. She seemed to hover there in a central disk of color. She was delightfully small and slim. She was delightfully small and slim. She was clad in a shimmering, clinging veil of pinks and yellows. She was young. How young he couldn't know. Perhaps twenty, with small, well rounded lips, violet eyes that smiled into his, and a very fair complexion.

He gasped.

Her tiny feet were shod with silver slippers, and she hovered in space—in the revolving disks of color. She smiled and her red lips parted. Her body was like a promise of love. Coates' mouth was dry. He wanted to speak.

"Lela?"

Her finger went to her lips. She was frowning and smiling at once. Cautioning him, warning him. Then, like a faint sigh, he heard her voice.

"You have only arrived. Remember this. *I* am the true Lela. You did not search for beauty in vain. *You must believe that*. In spite of what you see, in spite of everything you hear, *I am the true Lela*."

"I know," he managed to gasp. "I know—oh God, how well I know. I wanted to come so badly. I . . ."

His words were gone before he spoke them. There were rising winds that blew the color disks about in pro-

fusion. Winds that pushed Lela back until she was lost in the colored disks and was gone. Then the colors were gone also, and he was in a plain blue walled throne room. Skip was beside him, staring.

"What the devil you mumbling about?" Skip asked.

Coates knew suddenly that Skip had not seen Lela. Had not seen the colors. Only he—Coates, had seen.

"Look," Skip said. "You been staring at that monstrosity for five minutes. What we gonna do about her?"

Coates focused his eyes on the throne. Lela was there. He recognized the slippers, the rainbow robe. He knew the slim body. . .

"Good — Lord . . .?"

The words were jerked cruelly from his lips. He felt the blood draining from his face.

The creature on the throne was *not* Lela. The figure and the gown were Lela's. But now he saw the difference, and his eyes and his brain came into sharp focus.

The woman on the throne had the same ugly bloated face, the green eyes, the gash of mouth, the horrible holes where her nostrils should be. Her hands were claws, gripping the arms of the throne. Claws projected from the silver sandals.

She spoke to him, and her voice was husky and low.

"Greeting, Outsider. Lela makes you welcome to the Planet of Thon. You are welcome to the Court of Clide."

Without quite knowing what he was doing, Coates moved closer. He mouthed the question that he prayed would not be answered.

"You—are—Princess Lela?"

She nodded. Her laugh was hollow—terrible.

"I am Lela. Are you surprised?"

He was within ten feet of her now. He still could not believe.

"But—the book?"

Her arm raised slightly to silence him.

"I know nothing of a book."

"The perfume?"

He tried desperately to make her admit that she had trapped him.

She sounded angry and impatient.

"Book? Perfume? You speak madness. Outsider, be careful or I shall grow impatient. Remember, we are being courteous to you both. Don't force me to forget that you are a guest here. You could as easily become a prisoner."

He nodded slowly.

"Forgive me," he said slowly. "I . . ."

"Enough," Lela said. "Clide will show you to your room. You are welcome to stay on Thon until you can be sent back to your familiar haunts. That will take some arranging. Meanwhile, watch your tongue and mind that you ask me no more foolish riddles. You are excused."

AS THOUGH in a dream, Coates turned away and moved back toward Skip. A man came from the shadows of the room. He was like the others, perhaps taller and better formed. His robe was black instead of the white that had already become familiar to Coates. His eyes, green like the others, held a promise of cruelty.

He spoke with a bitterness that he could not, or refused, to conceal.

"So, an Outsider has to blunder into this place? If Lela wishes it, you are safe. Come with me."

Still dazed, still filled with emotions that would not blend to suit his peace of mind, Coates followed Count Clide from the room. Skip cursed steadily in a low voice.

Only one thing remained now to confront the shipping clerk from Planetary Research. The violet perfume that Lela of the throne had claimed no knowledge of was very close to him here. It wrapped itself about him, caressing him as he followed the gaunt Count Clide down endless halls.

He smiled gently, remembering the vision among the color disks. The girl who had whispered so softly to him.

"In spite of what you see, in spite of everything you hear, I am the true Lela."

Coates was still smiling sardonically when Count Clide opened the door to the dark chamber.

"This will be your room. Your man can sleep at the foot of your couch. When you want me, call me on the color screen."

"Thanks," Coates said.

He watched the ugly face in the doorway. Count Clide grinned, and his green eyes became slits.

"I don't think you will trouble us," he said. It was almost a whisper.

The door closed.

Coates could still hear those words spoken softly in his dream. It *was* a dream, he assured himself. A dream that he had conjured up of a girl he would have *liked* to meet on Thon."

"I am the true Lela."

"To hell with you," Coates shouted suddenly. He amazed himself by losing control like that. He looked around at Skip, and Skip was frowning.

"I got a hunch that everybody around here is crazy," Skip said. "Including you. How the devil I let myself get mixed up with a lunatic, I'll never know."

Coates looked at him for a second without replying. Then he stared around him at the immense darkened room. There was a bed in the far

corner and some divans. They were all made from the same black material. The room itself, though light enough to see his way about, was decorated in ebony.

"Well" he said without humor, "if this be the asylum, let's make the best of it. I think it's about time I talked to someone, and you deserve an explanation, Skip Nealson. Listen to the babbling of a fool."

It took a long time for Herbert Coates to tell Skipper Nealson everything he had to say. He held none of it back. None, that is, except that last colorful dream he had had just before he faced the ugly Lela. He told about the book and how he had always dreamed of being an adventurer. How he had trusted all along, thinking that a beautiful woman was helping him find his way here, only to find that she was an ugly witch.

"A dark, horrible witch," he said, and sighed. "Skip we don't know each other very well. I can't blame you if you're angry. I think if I were you, I'd wring the neck of a certain Herbert Coates and take a chance of getting out of this mess alone."

Skip seemed to think about that for a long time. Skip was no fool. There was a deep intelligence behind that strong, unlovely face. There was in Skip a great love for riches, but also there was a worship for adventure and for men who sought it. He stared at Coates for some time after the earthman had finished the story.

"You say you got all this dope out of a book?"

Coates nodded.

"I'd like to see it," Skip said. "I'm beginning to understand that you ain't a fool at all. There's more to this than meets the eye. Doggone, but I can't help thinking that you were chosen to come here. That it was meant that

way, like they talk about a man's destiny. All settled in advance."

Coates reached into his pocket. His hand came out empty. He was thinking back swiftly to the place where he had awakened on the ground and found the guides staring down at him.

"Gone," he said. "The book is gone. They must have stolen . . ."

"No matter," Skip said. "We're here, and *this* isn't any fiction."

He wandered across the room and sat down on the edge of the huge bed.

"If that Count Clide thinks *I'm* sleeping on the floor like a dog, he's crazy."

ANGER toward Clide was growing within Skipper Nealson. He looked up suddenly and grinned.

"Herb," he said, "you couldn't have picked a bigger crook to pour out your story to. Now *I'll* talk. When I get done, *you* can make some decisions."

He leaned back on the bed and crossed his legs.

"I'm a condemned man," he said.

Coates looked puzzled.

"A what?"

"Condemned," Skip said a little sharply. "I was ready to die on Jupiter for killing off a snag of no good space outlaws. Jupiter law says you can't kill a man even when he's a rat. You're supposed to use the paralysis ray on them and turn them over to the law. There ain't much to my story."

He sighed and went on talking dreamily.

"I was working for the Jupiter Law Patrol. I ran across a bunch of thieves who had been making it hot for legitimate trade all along the barrier. I got trigger happy and polished them off. Jupiter law said I had to die for it."

He sat up, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed.

"Mead didn't like losing me like that. He gave me the devil for what I'd done and made me promise to use my head in the future. He kept me hidden when my ship was in. Out along the barrier—well—you sorta make your own laws. I wasn't picked up—not when we met."

He wandered across the room and looked down on the machine Count Clide had called the color-screen. He ran his hand along the top of the polished metal.

"You see, Herb, you and I aren't going to be missed. No one is going to go out of their way looking for us."

Coates said:

"I guess we're on our own."

"Like I said," Skip repeated, "no one is looking for us. We can stay here and probably end up by getting the life knocked out of us by this Clide guy. Or maybe we can find our way around and get out. The ship is still up there in those damned hills. Maybe . . ."

"I am the true Lela."

Coates had stopped listening to Skipper Neelson. Stopped — for his mind was full of the girl of the vision. The room—ugly, black prison, was sweet at that moment with the violet perfume. He remembered the deep, almost pitifully sweet eyes. He seemed to hear the voice again.

"In spite of what you see . . ."

He had seen a horrible old woman on a throne.

His mind went reeling back crazily to the book. In the book Lela, young and lovely, was about to be thrown out of the Court of Clide. Clide was traitorous, ready to seize the realm.

In reality, Lela the witch was on the throne. Clide, her servant, obeyed her orders.

Coates shuddered.

"I think we better go slowly," he said. "If they want to destroy the ship, we can't prevent it. If they forget it, we can still make an attempt to get away after we've had a better chance to look around. I'd—like to find out what goes on here. Are you game, Skip?"

Skip grinned.

"I'm game, Herb. You're the boss. You got the education for it. I got the muscles. How about it? Divide the spoils if we're alive to divide 'em? You get the girl if you want her."

Coates frowned.

"That's one dream I guess I'll have to sidetrack," he said. "Meanwhile we'll try Clide. He's a bad customer."

"About as nasty as his sidekick, Lela," Skip admitted. "Okay, Clide said to call him on the color-screen."

COATES studied the nobbed surface of the panel. It was about five inches square and had three tiny keys built across the surface. Above each key was a glass-like panel of color. Black—red—green. Black indicated the name of *Clide* with a crest above it. Red—*The Throne*. Green—*Service*.

Coates pulled the black key down.

He had somehow expected a bell to ring or an alarm of some kind to result. Absolute silence greeted his effort. Only the colors of the room changed. The black faded, and faint rainbow lights started to play across walls and the floor. The room grew brighter. Then the door opened, and Count Clide, tall and ominous as ever, stood outside.

"Don't let the color disturb you, gentlemen," he said suavely. "I find black disturbing. Whenever my key is pressed, clean, pleasant light combinations result. I enjoy moving in pleasant surroundings."

Coates decided on a direct approach. No sense in fearing this thing. You

can't overcome a problem with fear.

"Look here," he said, "we want some explanation. Our ship went out of control after we crossed the barrier. We landed out of control in this place. Why are we being treated as prisoners? When are we going to be set free?"

Clide's face was like a leather mask. It told him nothing.

"You are not prisoners. You are the first Outsiders to come to Thon. We don't want you here. We have no use for Outsiders. You have a certain foreign beauty that makes the people of Thon restless. You would make our people dissatisfied with themselves if you moved freely among them. That is why you have been isolated. Lela will decide what is to become of you."

Coates felt silly, being referred to as a person of "beauty." He understood, however, that Clide might be right. True, everyone he had seen was so ugly that they might make Skip and himself appear handsome. With distaste he remembered the description of Lela's beauty. Certainly a misunderstood set of comparisons had been used there.

"Then we can't leave here until someone decides what is to become of us?"

Clide smiled. It wasn't much of a smile. His lips parted slightly, and the muscles of his hard mouth relaxed.

"On the contrary, you will see all there is to see, and you will be hidden from our people in the color-swirls."

Coates thought that color, the sight of it, the reference to it ever since he arrived in this strange place, would drive him mad. Everything was color. Bright, shimmering rainbows of it.

"I don't get it," Skipper Neelson was saying. "These—color-swirls, what are they?"

Clide came into the room holding a rod for Coates to take. It was about a foot long, an inch in diameter, and

made of a dull black metal.

"Whenever people of Thon wish to travel without being watched by curious hordes," he said, "they use the color rod. It's quite harmless. Press the button at the base of the rod."

Coates hesitated.

"It can't harm you," Clide said, and his voice was filled with biting sarcasm. "What courage you Outsiders have."

Furious at the cutting words, Coates pressed the button. At once a shimmering disk of red light grew about him. Then yellow, pink and green disks added themselves, all shooting from the tip of the rod. He looked at Skip and at Count Clide. Both men were covered by a similar group of light disks.

"Cripes," he heard Skip say, "this *is* something. What in the . . .?"

Clide laughed harshly.

"The secret of light and of the color prisms is an old art on Thon."

But Coates wasn't thinking of the rod in his hand. He was thinking of a short time back, when similar colors had sprung up in front of him, with a lovely girl making herself visible in their center. Gradually, the dream was changing to reality. The realization that it had been no dream. *There had been a girl in the color disks, and she had been real.*

Lela? Then who was the wretch on the throne?

"**B**Y RELAXING the pressure on the color rod," Clide said, "you can see about you clearly through the color. Others see little of your features. By use of more—or less—color, you can see and be seen, or you can hide yourself completely. There would be no hope of escaping in this manner. All color rods are checked carefully. They are used only in the Court. If you attempted to escape to the hills, the guards would pin you down with spot-

ter guns and destroy you completely. Skip sighed.

"Nice to know that," he said. "I been thinking that you were a little too nice to us, giving us this thing."

Clide didn't trouble to answer.

"Come," he said. "We'll look about. There is enough color about you now. Others will not see your features clearly and will not become unhappy or curious."

They followed him out into a long hall and down wide steps from the black room. As Clide moved forward into various rooms, flashes of light went ahead of him, making the path bright and cheerful. He walked lightly, his slim body erect as a nobleman's should be. He explained as he walked.

"This is the Court of Clide. Each year Lela the Princess chooses a Court, usually the property of some high noble. This year I was so honored, and Lela came here for a period of twelve months to rule her people. After Lela so chooses the home of a noble, that place becomes a shrine. The man who is so honored becomes one of the Honor Guard to watch over and protect the Princess."

They had left the building and were wandering about the courtyard. Coates was looking for some manner of escape. He saw none. High walls reached upward, making the place a prison. Guards marched about high above. There was a garden of strange exotic flowers. Clide led them through it.

"How long will Lela stay here," Skip asked.

Coates wondered why he had not thought of that.

"She has honored me with six months of her presence," Clide said thoughtfully. "She *plans* to leave within the coming ten days."

Coates didn't like the way he said *plans*.

"Where will she go?"

"*Into the hills*," Clide said. "That is, into the hills, to visit some of the hill noblemen."

Into the hills.

Once more in the black room, Coates knew only this. The castle of the Court of Clide was a tough proposition. He would never escape alive until he knew more than he knew now.

The more he knew, the less he *wanted* to escape.

"Now you take the way he said *into the hills*," Skipper Nealson said quietly. "That guy is crooked. He hates our guts because we're at least human to look at. He isn't. That alone is enough to make him want to get rid of us. He can't allow us to escape because we'd get back here again somehow, some way and throw a *real* monkey wrench into his machinery. That book you was telling me about, Herb. Didn't it say that Lela would be banished to the hills?"

Coates was thinking about that.

"It said she would be thrown from the Court of Clide and banished into the hills," he said. "Still, the book must have been fiction. Something someone wrote, knowing just a little about Thon and having an entirely wrong idea of Lela's beauty."

Skip was watching Coates closely.

"Still crazy over that pipe dream, ain't you? Lost your heart to a dream Princess?"

Coates didn't smile. He felt miserable.

"There's a riddle here," he said with sudden determination. "A riddle that I'm going to solve."

Skip sighed.

"If you live long enough," he said.

"THERE was no book," the voice said.

Herbert Coates groaned in his sleep

and turned over. Skip, snoring at his side, grunted and snored harder.

"There was no book. It was the only way I could send my message."

Coates was having the craziest dream.

"Good morning, Miss Adams," he said, and doffed his hat to the girl behind the switchboard. In his dream he was walking swiftly through the long, spotlessly white halls of Planetary Research with a book clutched tightly in his hands. The book was titled "The Fall of Princess Lela," and he had fallen in love with Lela, who the book said, surpassed all others in her loveliness.

"There was no book."

Coates was angry. The voice kept saying that, and he knew damned well that there *was* a book. Could he help it if he lost the thing. Suddenly he was wide awake, staring straight at the ceiling, eyes wide, perspiration standing out on his forehead.

The voice wasn't a dream. The voice and the dream intermingled, but even awake as he was now, the voice came again. It was soft and gentle and it came from a great distance.

"The book was your *imagination*. I had no other way to make you understand."

"Who are you?" he said in a strained, frightened voice. He recognized the voice. It was the voice of Lela. The lovely Lela of the color disks.

"No matter now," the voice filled the dark chamber with a sigh. "I sent a message to the Outside. We of human visage can do that. Once my father asked for assistance from a great earth laboratory. He preserved the wavelength of the laboratory in his papers. I knew no other wavelength so I contacted the laboratory. I couldn't transmit my voice. No one would believe. No one would help me."

Coates lay quietly. Skip was still snoring. He wondered why Skip didn't awaken—didn't hear the voice. He knew. He knew because he didn't *hear* the voice himself. He heard it with his brain through *thought* transmissions coming from outside the room.

"I dared hope someone would help me. We have a secret on Thon. The secret of producing illusions. The book was an illusion. You never really read it. You never saw it. You were hypnotized to *believe* you saw it."

The perfume. The wondrous violet perfume was like wild flowers in the room.

"And you came. That was the miracle. You came to help me."

"Lela," he said softly aloud. "Lela, for Heaven's sake tell me that the girl I saw in the color disks was you? Tell me, Lela, the girl I saw . . .?"

The sigh came again. A pitiful, wailing sigh.

"The woman of the throne—or the girl of the disks? I don't know. I can't tell you now. I'm—not—sure. You won't go away? You won't desert me?"

The voice was pleading with him.

"I won't go away." Sweat poured down his face. His fists were clenched. "I can't do anything. My hands are tied. I want to help, God knows. I'd do anything. How could I imagine I read the book? How?"

"You will know," the voice said. "Listen to me. You have a brave man with you. A strong man. You have a fine brain. You have greater knowledge than you think. Use it. Open your eyes to everything that happens. Don't go away from the Court of Clide. Demand to see Lela the Princess. Somehow you will help me. I am sure of it. *Watch Count Clide*. I sent a thought transference to you. It was a detailed story. *What you thought you read in a book must not happen*. Do you understand?"

For the sake of all who dwell on Thon and for *your sake*, it must not happen. You are the only one who can change it."

"Lela," Coates was getting desperate. It was as though both arms were strapped behind him. How could he help—and when?

"Lela," his own voice was growing weak. It wasn't fright. It was that great tidal wave of feeling of being helpless to act. "What can I do?"

"You can save a planet," she said softly. "You can save the beauty and intelligence of a once great people and you can save a Princess. Surely that is enough?"

"How?"

The voice was low again, filled with promise.

"Demand an audience with Lela."

Her words seemed to echo over and over.

COATES realized that Skip was no longer asleep. The snoring had stopped.

"Skip—did you hear . . .?"

"I ain't heard nothing," Skip Neilson said savagely. "But I see something I don't like. If you ever wanted to tackle something big and give it a beating, double your fists, Herb. Trouble is coming in at the door."

Startled, Coates twisted toward the door, coming up on one elbow. A great disk of ugly, green and purple light was revolving slowly across the floor. Behind it, the door was open. The disk widened, and sparks of all colors shot from it. Something you couldn't stop or reason with, it came onward, steadily, the fire sputtering weirdly as it shot from the center of the disk.

Without thinking, Coates snatched his holster from the table beside the bed. He ripped the gun from it and aimed at the center to the disk.

"That won't do any good."

Even as Skip howled at him, Coates fired—twice in quick succession. He fired at the direct center of the light.

The light didn't falter. It kept coming, hissing ugly colored death. Skip was already out of the far side of the bed. Coates followed him, perspiration making his whole body wet. He stood there, shivering as the disk hit the bed.

The bed caught fire and smoke rolled upward, mushrooming out on the ceiling. The room was a weird, burning hell of a place, and the disk was past the bed and still pursuing them.

"The door," Skip yelled. "Get out the door."

Together they ran for it. Coates, last, slammed the door behind him. He hesitated, wondering if the disk would come on.

"What troubles the Outsiders?"

Coates whirled around. Count Clide, dressed in a long black gown and dark sandals, stood a few feet down the hall. He seemed greatly concerned.

"Nothing," Coates said savagely. He was really angry now. His blood was up. For two cents he'd smack a fist into Clide's contented face and glory in the blood that would run from the Count's nose. Coates couldn't ever remember a time when he had been angry like this. It—it was just one thing piling up on the other.

"Nothing?" Clide seemed perplexed. "But—why this wild exit from your room? I happened to be . . ."

"Passing by, of course," Skip Neilson said. "You wouldn't know nothing about that damned fireball in our room."

Clide's face turned a shade paler.

"I don't understand . . .?"

Nevertheless, he hurried to the door and jerked it open. Smoke rushed out into the hall. He plunged into the room, and Coates followed.

Clide pivoted.

"I see no fireball. Was this a practical joke of the type Outsiders so often love to play?"

Coates pointed to the smouldering mass that had five minutes before been their bed.

"Very *funny* joke," he said. "If we hadn't been awake, we'd have been burned crisp by your little ball of fire."

Clide's mouth grew harsh.

"I don't like your continued reference to *my* ball of fire. If there was an accident, I'm very sorry. Steps will be taken . . ."

"You're darned right they will," Coates growled. "I demand to see Princess Lela. She'll do something for us. We're supposed to be guests. I don't believe she'd appreciate her guests being burned out in the middle of the night."

Clide stood his ground before Coates, his arms crossed, his face reflecting a cold, hateful anger.

"I couldn't disturb the Princess at this time of night."

"You're darned well *going* to disturb her," Coates said. He even amazed himself with the tone of his voice.

Count Clide backed away slowly. His eyes were like twin jewels of ebony stone.

"I'd be very careful if I were you, *little man* . . ."

"CRACK."

Afterward, Coates couldn't decide just how he'd had the nerve to do it. He didn't take time to think. When Clide called him "*little man*," it burned him up. It hurt his pride.

HE ROCKED forward gently on his toes, came up swiftly and planted his right fist on Clide's jaw. Clide's eyes popped open wide with amazement. He tried to cry out, but no sound came from his lips, and he sank down

on his knees slowly.

Clide shook his head back and forth and got to his feet. The fire in his eyes was intensified, but his voice was suddenly low, almost gentle.

"You made a terrible mistake, Outsider."

Coates was still panting with the effort the blow had taken. It wasn't the strength it had taken. It was the nerve. This was the first time in his life he had hit a man. His courage didn't seem to fail him as he expected it would. He felt as though he'd enjoy hitting Clide again. Maybe he would.

"Shut up," Coates snapped. "I'm tired of talking circles around everything that's important. Princess Lela is ruler here. You're just her flunky, and it's time you started acting like one instead of like the king himself."

He was watching Clide's eyes. They blinked a couple of times. Clide's face got very red.

"I'll see that Lela punishes you for this."

"You would," Skip interrupted suddenly. He had been watching Coates with wide eyes. "You wouldn't fight your own battles. You ain't got the guts."

Clide turned abruptly and strode down the hall. They followed him. None of them spoke for the next few minutes. Clide seemed to pay no attention to them, as though they were so unimportant that their fate was already sealed.

He stopped at the far end of the great hall. He pounded on a huge door. For a few seconds nothing happened, and he pounded again. A voice came from beyond the door. A sleepy, husky voice.

"Who seeks to destroy my slumber?"

No mistaking the voice. It was Lela. Ugly Lela of the throne.

"It is I, Clide."

They heard the sounds of movement

beyond the door. Then the voice again, angry and impatient.

"And who are you to trouble me at this hour?"

"I'm sorry, Princess." Clide was at once humble, though an ugly smile still curved his lips. "The Outsiders *demand* to see you."

The door flew open. Lela, dressed in her black night garment, was even more terrible to look at. Her dark, smoldering eyes surveyed Coates and Skipper Nealson.

"And *what* have these gentlemen to say that is so important it cannot wait until morning?"

Clide laughed. Coates started to say something, then caught his breath. Skip just stared at the ugly woman in the doorway.

"Well?"

"May I suggest, your highness," Clide spoke in mock humbleness, "that the Outsiders be given a *safer* room in which to lodge."

A patronizing smirk lighted his face.

"They tell wild stories of fire-balls that have entered their room and destroyed their bed. They seem to blame *me*. The smaller of the two dared strike me."

An emotionless chuckle came from the Princess' ugly mouth.

"I should have liked to have seen that."

"Princess, may I remind you . . ."

Lela looked suddenly tired. Very, very tired.

She waved her arm in a gesture of dismissal.

"Never mind your pride, Clide. Put the two of them away. Put them—under the walls."

Clide looked alarmed.

"You mean to go through with . . .?"

"What I do is none of your concern, Clide," Lela snapped. "You are still taking orders from me?"

Clide nodded slowly.

"Your wish is my command, Lela."

His voice was as low as a whisper.

"Then—goodnight."

The door closed silently.

Clide turned, drew a small whistle from his pocket and blew upon it. A tiny, silvery thread of sound came from it. Three men, all over six feet tall, armed with spears, and each cursed with the black ugly faces, came swiftly down the hall.

"We are taking the Outsiders to a new lodging," Clide said. "*Under the walls.*"

The men closed in.

"Take it easy, Herb," Skip said.

"Those spears are finger control fire cannon. You'd be blown to Jupiter."

Clide chuckled.

"Most wise of you to caution your friend," he said. "Although there is no time for caution now. You have listened to your death sentence."

HERBERT COATES hadn't given up hope entirely. For five nights, as near as he could judge, Skip and he had been locked in the tiny rock cell. Clide and his men had brought them here, far below the walls of the palace. There they had been fed, fishy-tasting stuff that felt like corn meal on the tongue, served with rough bread and dirty water. It came into the cell through the bars. No light came with it but the light of the jailer's lamp. When it was gone, day and night were the same.

Yes, Coates thought, it must be close to the coming of the fourth day. He sat alone, head tipped forward against his chest. He couldn't see Skip, but the big man was asleep. They had slept part of the time. They were aware of others locked near them, for the jailer opened many doors along the corridor. Yet there were no voices in the darkness.

No one spoke.

Coates wondered about Lela. He realized that the Lela he dreamed of *had* to be reality in one way or another. Even his mind wasn't equipped with the imagination necessary to dream of *her*.

But where did she fit in?

Was she, in fact, a ghost that haunted this place? Lela of the throne may have been young once. May have been lovely. What had changed her?

"Don't tire yourself with riddles for which you cannot know the answer."

Coates jumped to his feet. Three steps took him to the cell door.

"Whoever you are, let us out," his voice was hoarse with eagerness.

For an instant the cell was very silent.

Then the voice came again. The same voice he had heard in his room that night. The voice of the dream Lela.

"I cannot let you out yet. The whole plan would be spoiled. Are you alert? Can you listen and remember every word I say?"

"Yes," Coates said eagerly. "Yes, for God's sake, not much more of this torture. We can't stand it. Skipper is sick. We'll both die down here. Who are you? Where do you manage to hide?"

The violet perfume was close. It pressed against him, warm, alluring.

"I am close but you cannot see me."

"Why can't I? I saw you once. I saw you in the color disks."

The Princess sighed.

"I *had* to show myself then or you wouldn't have believed. You would have gone away."

He laughed bitterly.

"You've trapped me," he said. "I can't run away now."

"No—no, I haven't. I promise."

"You're old and ugly," Coates said angrily. "You're a smart witch, with

your charms and your soft promises. Do you think I'm blind? Go ahead, drive me crazy. I'll die soon enough. Have your fun."

He was positive that Lela was sobbing now.

"No—no! I promised myself not to tell you. Not yet. Now I must. I can't have you thinking . . ."

Her voice stopped abruptly.

Coates held his breath listening.

"I must tell you everything," Lela said. Her voice was steady now. "Listen to me. Don't interrupt, for I have little time to talk. There are two types of people on Thon. The Ugly Ones, led by Count Clide, have been jealous of the Fair Ones for many centuries. Clide has captured the Fair Ones, a few at a time, and thrown them into the flame pits . . ."

"The flame—pits?"

"Hush," the Princess' voice was very close to his ear now, almost whispering. "You will learn of them in due time. Lela was a fair Princess. She ruled the Fair Ones for many years. Then her father died. Her father was a man of science. With his passing, Lela no longer had the cunning to outsmart Clide.

"One by one a dozen at a time, Lela's subjects were kidnapped and subjected to the flame pits. They came out blackened, shapeless objects, looking as Clide does. Acting as his people do.

"I, Lela, tried to fight against Clide. I found out that only cunning would succeed. I had almost given up my fight when I learned an amazing fact.

"Clide rules because never yet has a man escaped the pits unharmed. Thon has sought the rule of an Outsider. Clide laughs and tells them that he is far wiser than the Outsiders and that the Outsiders would not associate with so ugly a race."

Coates was listening carefully, try-

ing to understand this odd tale.

"I still don't see . . ."

"Quiet! The guards will come for you soon. Listen to me. I, Lela, was led to the fire pits. I went through them but I was prepared to withstand the flame with a secret my father gave me."

"It didn't work very well," Coates said sardonically. He couldn't believe a word she said. She was lying, he kept repeating to himself. She lies—she lies.

"Listen to the remainder of my story. My father told me that if an Outsider went into that pit and came out unharmed, the people would be so impressed that they would overthrow Clide. They would think that the Outsider was a God."

"If you're so darned smart," Coates said, "why didn't *you* prove how *you* could withstand the flame?"

The voice spoke, then ended in a pitiful sob.

"I'm sorry," Coates said. He wasn't quite sure of himself.

"I KNOW that you don't understand," Lela whispered. "Father held the secret of outside communication by thought wave. My own gift, the radionic perfume, was to help me also. I set my trap and tried to bring a man here who had the adventurous spirit, the intelligence to help me. I should have known that such a wild story . . ."

The girl's sobbing—her plea for help was so genuine that Coates was beginning to feel like an unreasonable fool.

"I'm trying to understand," he said. "Tell me some more about this place. If it fits in with what I already know, I'll try to understand."

Her voice became steady.

"What is it you would know?"

"Color," he said savagely. "Where the hell does it come from? Everything is seeped with it."

"The air is a thousand per cent clearer on Thon," she said quietly. "It has been so for many centuries. You see everything in its true value. As for the color shields, disks, and the use we make of it for protection," she sighed. "Well, we are as far advanced in the use of the color spectrum as earth is in other fields. We can travel in the midst of colors. Color is made so powerful by our machines that it becomes solid and strong enough to carry a heavy object from place to place."

"I still don't understand it," Coates said.

"No more do I understand earth plastic," Lela's voice said. "We know nothing of plastic, or how you can make indestructible towers of the stuff. Does that make plastic on earth something that I dream of but that does not exist?"

It sounded reasonable.

"The perfume?" he asked. "Why—how did you send it?"

"That last answer—first," Lela answered. "By including it into the thought wave or pattern of thought. You read a book. Actually, you didn't read the words. You dreamed that you held such a book and studied the words. You see, that thought wave hit the entire area about the laboratory. You had the only brain sensitive enough to pick up the message."

"And being a sucker," Coates said, "I fell for . . ."

"You still do not believe?"

Coates considered.

"Now I'll do the talking," he said. "I'm Herbert Coates, the little guy who never ran. I'm a simpleton, a dope, and a guy who no one ever looks at twice."

"I got a message. Maybe it's okay. Maybe you're a sweet thing who *doesn't* eat babies and spit tobacco juice. I don't know. Anyhow, I read a book that I *didn't* read—I traveled a jagged hunk of impossible miles to nowhere, seeking a girl whom I dreamed about and whose perfume drew me straight to Thon."

He stopped talking, wondering if she were listening.

"Go on."

"Okay," he said. "I'm tossed into a bedroom and sleep in a bed that burns me out the first night. Then I'm locked in a cell and sit here in the dark for three days.

"When I'm on the spot, a nice voice comes along and *explains*. The explanation only gives me a headache. Well, if you can *expect* me to understand, then you're giving me credit for something I'm not capable of. I'm not immortal and I'm not very brave. I'm just a guy who's scared and more than anything else, *I want out*."

"But I *do* understand," Lela's voice was gentle and understanding. "If you walk through the flame pit and face Clide unharmed . . ."

Coates groaned.

"I shrink from the flame of a match. Can you honestly expect me to walk in the stuff?"

Her voice was patient and serene.

"You'll do it, for I have faith in you. I, Lela, whom you saw when you first came. I, Lela, who sent a message to earth that couldn't possibly be heard by anyone but a brave, intelligent man."

Coates paced back and forth in the cell.

"Why do people who are punished in a flame pit turn around and worship the guy who does it?"

Lela's voice was low and filled with pain.

"THERE are many kinds of fire," she said. "Fire that burns the brain of a man and makes him animal. There are a few thousand intelligent men left on Thon. The remainder of them dare not be caught by Clide. *You* are the Outsider whom he hates and *fears*. He tried to destroy you in flame the night he gave you the rod and told you it was a simple color screen which you should hide behind."

Something snapped into focus in Coates' brain.

"You mean—the color disks? They were meant to destroy Skip and me?"

"What else? To a man of Thon, the color would have meant death. Now Clide knows that he must seek another way to destroy you. Will you allow your chance to escape to go unheeded?"

Coates was miserable.

"I don't know," he groaned. "I told you I'm nobody. I'm so darned frightened now I'd like to run all the way home."

"I wonder," Lela's voice said softly, "if you are half as frightened as you think? I wonder if courage is there, when it is needed?"

"No courage. Nothing but fear."

"You struck Clide. That is more than a man here would dare to do."

"I couldn't help it," Coates admitted.

"Besides, I'm going to die for it."

"Would it help if you could see me again?"

"The apparition on the throne?"

Her voice was low and sincere.

"I mean—the *real* Lela?"

He sighed.

"Dammit, I want to believe. Honestly I do."

"Do you think you would have the courage to fight for—the *real* Lela?"

"I've got the courage to die for her if she really exists," he said.

Suddenly the perfume was warm and closer than ever before. A face seemed

to materialize before his own. A face so young and sweet that as the girl's lips touched his, perspiration broke from his forehead, and his heart seemed to pound until it threatened to break from his chest.

"Good—Lord," he mumbled.

Her voice was soft, pleading.

"You must demand to pass the test of the flame pit. Demand it of the woman on the throne. Make Clide let you enter the pit—while Lela watches."

"But—how can I do that?"

"Lela will find a way."

Then the lips met his own, and the room was a whirling, lost darkness leaving him clinging to that one kiss—then nothing. Lela was gone. The voice came once more.

"You have courage, Outsider. I'm sorry I could only send a vision of myself to you. If you caress a dream of me so tenderly, I long to feel the actual touch of your arms. Don't fail me, Outsider. If you fail me today, we shall both die, you and I."

Empty silence closed in about Coates. The cell seemed darker. Even the perfume was gone. He listened for any sound, anything for comfort. Only Skip's snoring interrupted the stillness of the cell.

"COME out."

Coates stumbled through the open door of the cell. Skip followed. Coates could hardly see. The light of the jailer's lamp nearly blinded him. He recognized Count Clide's voice.

"Where you taking us now?" It was Skip, still ready to fight, still unbeaten.

"You'll know soon enough," Clide said.

He led the way up the long flights of stairs into the daylight. The jailer and the guards, marching behind them, had fire pistols drawn.

The jailer dropped behind at the last

gate to the prison. They went on into the blinding light of the palace corridors, straight to the throne room. Coates was the first to notice that Lela was even more horrible to look at than she had been at first. Perhaps it was the delicate, frothy dress of pale blue, contrasting with the dark, horrible flesh.

They advanced to the center of the throne room. Coates realized that something unusual was going on.

The room itself, more than fifty feet square, was filled with the subjects of Thon. They were seated, their eyes on Clide, Lela, and on Skipper Nealson and himself. The faces weren't friendly. The room was filled with the murmur of voices.

"You have brought the prisoners," Lela said. It wasn't the gentle voice that Coates had heard in the cell. It was the hoarse, low monotone that frightened him, made him wonder if he were still sane.

"They are here," Clide said. There was respect in his voice. "It is time to discuss them."

The Princess nodded.

"I agree with you," she said. "I suggest you subject them to the fire-pit."

Clide's face turned a trifle pale.

"I thought it was decided that these men, being Outsiders, would not have the opportunity to become citizens of Thon."

"Oh?" The Princess said. "Oh! Yes, we did agree. However, they cannot face the fire-pit without becoming disfigured even as we are. Why not punish them before they die? Punish them for daring to come here? It will serve as a lesson to others."

Clide shook his head.

"I cannot agree, Princess," he said stubbornly. "The pit is, in a sense of the word, sacred. Those who walked through it have been cleansed and

sanctified so that they might dwell on Thon in unity and brotherhood. To send two criminals into such a place would be spitting in the face of our Gods. I'm sure you will agree?"

Excited murmurs arose about the room. It was hard to tell what went through the minds of those people. Some wanted to see Coates and Skip burned in the fire. Others agreed with Clide. The fire-pit was sacred and not to be used for such a purpose.

Lela came slowly to her feet. There was deep anger in her voice.

"It seems to me, Clide," she said sternly, "that you have been increasingly against any suggestion I make. Do I rule from your throne, or am I a figurehead, and *you* the true ruler?"

Clide's face was flaming red.

"But—my Princess. Of course, your word is power. I'm sorry if I . . ."

"Don't waste time being sorry," Lela said quietly. "See that these Outsiders perish in the fire-pit."

Beyond the gardens, through a small door in the wall, they made their way. Behind them came Lela, carried in her litter, and at her side, Count Clide, a fierce scowl on his face.

There were soldiers of Clide, wearing his colors, and men and women of the Court. Each of them was enjoying this in their own way. Some had been handsome once, and Clide had forced them into the fire-pit and claimed them as his subjects, even as he planned to claim Lela. Others were born among the Ugly Ones, and had never seen the fire-pit.

Coates marched beside Skipper Nealson, his mind working furiously, wondering how much he could depend on the comforting voice that had come to him in the dungeon.

THEY went down long steps, at first into an open pit, then lower into

the earth itself. Torches carried behind them sent weird lights ahead. The tunnel narrowed, and the steps grew short. Coates felt very warm. The heat down here was dry. It swept up and past them from a chamber further down. They were pressed ahead swiftly by the throng behind.

"I don't like this mess," Skip said grimly. "We ain't got any chance to get out of here."

Coates wondered what he should tell Skip. If he mentioned Lela?

"Listen, Skip," he kept his voice low. "I can't tell you all of it because I don't know for sure myself. Somehow, there's someone trying to help us. If we keep our mouths shut and our eyes open, I think we've got a chance."

Skip shot him a puzzled glance.

"Riddles again, huh?" He scowled. "Sometimes your riddles pay off and sometimes they don't."

They continued on in silence.

"Okay," Skip said finally, "I'll watch you. You give the signals."

They emerged into a small, rounded chamber. It was a simple place, carved from the white, soft stone. In the center Coates saw a small pit, perhaps three feet deep, with a series of two inch holes perforating its floor.

"The fire-pit," Coates whispered. Clide caught up with them now, and Lela was at his side, ugly, purposeful. Coates found it harder than ever to believe now.

The people of the Court circled the pit. They leaned back against the wall watching. Clide was nervous. He didn't seem to enjoy the situation.

"Well?" Lela snapped. "What are you waiting for? Put them through their hell. Torture them all you wish."

She made a brutal movement with her hand as though she were slicing Coates' neck.

Clide swung around, his hands on his

hips, eyes suddenly like cold steel.

"How can we be sure that they will not escape the fire-pit. That it will . . . ?"

He stopped short, for Lela was laughing at him aloud. She tipped back her head and laughed until Coates, sickened by that leering face, had to look away. When she was breathless, she spoke to Clide, but Coates felt that she was talking more directly to everyone of them in the small crypt.

"You speak riddles, Count Clide." Lela's lips curled. "At times I fail to understand you. Are you not the leader of the Ugly Ones?"

Clide was very angry but he betrayed himself only with his eyes. His voice remained calm and respectful.

"I am."

"Then listen to me, Clide," Lela demanded. "There were two factions on Thon. The Ugly Ones and the Fair Ones. You *convinced* many that the fire-pit was the only way to wash away sin. You convinced them that by becoming a member of the Ugly Ones, they would never again cause the Gods to be jealous. The fire-pit took away our beauty, and we followed your gospel. Once I asked you why it was necessary to be ugly to prove that we are good. You said:

"Only the Gods themselves could enter the fire-pit without being changed.' To be disfigured and ugly, is to prove that we care nothing for beauty and were paying proper respect to our Gods."

Lela paused, breathing hard.

"Do you fear that *these* may be Gods?"

She included Skip and Herbert Coates with a sweeping gesture of her hand.

"Rot," Clide snapped. "Course . . ."

"Then into the pit with them," Lela cried.

Clide raised his arm. At the command a slave came forward and manipulated a series of levers beside the shallow, empty pool. A large disk of purple flame shot upward from the pool. The people gasped. The purple grew lighter until crimson flames shot upward to the ceiling of the cave. The crimson was broken up by darting yellow and gold highlights. The room was hushed, waiting.

Clide's voice grew strong. Either he was a perfect showman, or he had an ace hidden somewhere.

"Throw them into the pool."

"Wait," Lela said sharply. "Don't touch them. If I am not mistaken, they are not men, but Gods. They will go into the pool of their own accord."

She was talking directly to Coates.

He knew she was, though he didn't dare look at her. He spoke to Skip in low, urgent tones.

"It's the same light that we saw in our room that night. It burns the Thonians. Their skin is different than ours, I think. It doesn't harm us."

"Yeah?"

Coates' mind was working furiously. He knew that if they walked out of those flames alive Clide would take care of them *and* Lela. Clide had everything at stake now. If he failed in one way, he'd try another.

"Follow me in. If I'm right, no harm will come to us."

HE TOOK a deep breath and plunged into the pit. For an instant the color blinded him, and he thought that he was truly burning. Then the feeling passed. He heard Skip grunt with surprise at his side. Though the pit was small, they could see nothing. The lights arose about them, traveling up their bodies, seeking out every inch of them as though it were true flame. Nothing happened.

"*Outsiders*," Lela's voice came to Coates. "Are you suffering?"

Coates answered her, trying sincerely to play the part she wished him to play. Pretty or not, she was on his side now. She had proven that.

"*We are not harmed.*"

"You feel no pain?"

Coates laughed aloud. He paused impressively, then said:

"Princess Lela, *you* know that we can feel no pain. Haven't you carried this joke far enough? Must we go on pretending that we are foolish mortals?"

Before she could answer, Coates grasped Skip by the arm and whispered into his ear.

"Laugh, damn you. Laugh like you've never laughed before. Make this sound like the biggest joke that's ever happened to you."

Skip didn't question him. He let a belly laugh roll upward from his stomach. Coates laughed with him. They laughed like two insane men, catching their breath and doubling over with the effort.

Lela's voice came again.

"You are satisfied with the fool you have made of yourself, Clide?"

"*Now*," Coates said suddenly, "*Let's get out of here.*"

Clide's voice, suddenly cold and purposeful, stopped Coates short.

"Wait," Coates urged.

"*Lela, you're a fool*," Clide was calm in his rage. "It's time you found it out."

Coates could sense a terrific tension out there in the chamber.

Lela made no reply.

"It's time that you realize that *I* am the power on Thon."

So this was the time, was it? Coates was tense and waiting. Lela had needed him. Needed him when Clide, who had been preparing for it a long time, finally

decided to act.

"I don't think I understand?"

It was Lela, calm, polite.

"You will," Clide said sternly. "You aren't the ruler of Thon. You ruled the Fair Ones, and once they were powerful. Then I and the Ugly Ones grew powerful. With the Fire Pit I converted many of your kind. They have been loyal to me."

"Because the flame affected their brains and made them dull and listless. They followed you, yes, like cattle."

Clide chuckled.

"Then *you* became an Ugly One," he said mockingly. "Need I remind you that you also are dull—a follower, not a leader?"

The room was silent.

Coates walked to the edge of the pit and jumped out into the room.

LELA and Clide were drawn up proudly before each other. A gasp of amazement came from the crowd as Skip followed Coates out of the pool and stood there at his side, unharmed.

"Gods," Lela said calmly. "*Untouched by the flame.*"

She pivoted, ignoring Clide, facing the people.

"To the few of you who are here, carry this message to the outside."

She paused dramatically.

"I, Lela, am only a woman. I have ruled the Fair Ones and the Ugly Ones in complete fairness for many years. Before me, my father ruled you. Clide's power grew as *he* grew, until he managed to kidnap enough of my people and dull their brains so that he could build up a vast army of dullards as his followers.

"I have known that he plotted treason. I came to his Court knowing that I would die before I left here or

that Clide would die, and with him, his evil power."

Clide laughed.

"Save your voice. You cannot escape now. My men await above the tunnel. They have their orders."

Lela ignored him.

"I am a Princess but I am only a woman. I needed the help of powerful men. I called upon the Gods."

She motioned toward Coates.

"You have the answer. Could the Fire Pit harm these men?"

Lela was a good showman, Coates thought. She was weakening Clide's argument.

"The Gods have answered my call," Lela said softly. "They will lead my people back to me and they will destroy Clide."

"Not while I'm armed."

Clide whipped around, backing toward the tunnel, flame-gun in hand.

"Now—who are the Gods?"

Lela seemed not to notice him. She continued to speak.

"I have one favor to ask of the Gods," she said. "They journeyed far. They need rest now."

She took three steps forward, facing Coates, her eyes staring into his.

"You are powerful, Outsider," she said in a whisper. "One kiss for an ugly Princess before she dies?"

What madness was this, Coates wondered. Had Lela given up so easily? He stared down into the ugly face, the straight, red gash of mouth. Suddenly the eyes softened and became Lela's eyes. This was Lela of his dreams.

Without hesitation, drawn by a strange magic, he bent forward and kissed her lips.

She sprang away from him.

"Thank you." Her voice quivered with emotion. Before Coates' eyes an amazing change took place. Lela was no longer ugly. She was facing her

people, slim, vibrant with youth, her lovely, childlike eyes upon them. She was smiling, sure of herself.

A startled cry came from their lips. They believed in her power now. Dulled brains were stirred and awakened.

Clide, still near the entrance of the tunnel, laughed wildly.

"So, that also was a trick. You were not affected by the pit. You practiced black sorcery."

Lela turned upon him.

"Shoot me, Clide," she said. "You tried to destroy my beauty in the pit and you thought you had succeeded. If I go above ground again, and the Ugly Ones see me, they will worship me. They will forget what you told them. They will forget their ugly Princess and yearn for their pretty ruler again. You will have lost, Clide. Shoot now or you will lose."

Coates lost his head then. He dashed forward straight into the muzzle of the flame pistol. He heard it go off, and the full impact of the flame hit his shoulder and twisted him half around.

SMOTHERING the cry of pain that came to his lips, he fell forward, knocking Clide off balance. The room was alive with cries for revenge. Clide slammed him aside and started toward Lela. Coates caught him by the arm and dragged him down. Inside of Coates, intense hatred was burning. One thought was uppermost in his mind. Lela must live. Clide must not have the chance.

They rolled over and over on the floor. Clide was struggling to reach the gun. He managed to get his knee under Coates' chin and pushed with all his strength. Coates fell back panting, his burned shoulder painning him almost beyond endurance. He lunged out,

throwing himself on top of Clide. They slipped and fell into the pit.

A strange and terrible thing happened. The light had not harmed Coates. Yet, though he could not see inside it, he heard Clide scream with agony. He felt flames racing up Clide's clothing, and the man started actually to fall apart. Coates struggled free from the suffering Count and tried to drag him from the flame. It was too late.

Clide was burned so badly that Coates could no longer find a place to grasp him.

He heard Lela speak to him.

"You are safe, Outsider. Leave him where he has fallen."

The huge room was decorated with color-flame. The weird, beautiful light sprang up from the walls, decorating the throne room with bright pinks, blues, and yellows. Lela, dressed in her best, was seated smilingly on the throne. Before her, seated row on row, were the high men of Thon.

At Lela's right Herbert Coates and Skipper Nealson had been placed on thrones much like her own.

This was Lela's show, Coates thought.

His eyes were for Lela alone. All his dreams were answered at last. He had tried to be faithful to that dream, and she had materialized. Lela wore a long silver dress that clung to her slim body. Her hair, her face, were so serene, so beautiful, that she might be a goddess.

She spoke to the throng assembled in the room.

"Yesterday Clide died. You men of the Fair Ones were asked not to interfere with me until I delivered Clide's body to you. Now you have Clide or what is left of him. I'll attempt to explain."

Coates thought, "I hope she can ex-

plain a few things for me also. It's still—a puzzle."

Lela went on speaking quietly.

"Clide had a strong Kingdom started here. His Ugly Ones were beginning to realize their power. They followed his bidding and never questioned him. They thought he was a God.

"We could have come here from the provinces beyond the hills and killed Clide and his people. You wished to do that but you forgot one thing. His people were also *my* people, and though they were wrong, it was not their fault. It was Clide's. I could not see them slaughtered."

She sighed.

"So—I asked you to let me come alone to the Court of Clide. When I allowed him to hypnotize me and force me into the fire-pit, he thought that his triumph was complete. *He was wrong.*

"My father, who was powerful in science, taught me the power of the fire-pit. Men of Thon are sensitive to color-rays. They burn us as fire burns the people of other planets. Therefore, I practiced with the chemistry of my father. A chemistry of color that allowed me to effect false change in appearance. I was untouched by the pool *for I never entered the pool.* I was taken by two of Clide's men. They felt sorry for me. I promised them that Clide would never know I could effect a chemical change without entering the pool. When I emerged from the tunnel, I looked as though I had entered the pit, and Clide was happy."

She stopped talking and regarded Coates with happy, smiling eyes.

"I had to practice a magic strong enough to turn Clide's people against him. I had to find someone who would not be changed by the fire-pit. If I could do this, alone, then alone I might bring Clide's people back into my king-

dom without war.

"I sought a *God* who would not be touched by the fire. I asked for one," she laughed a tinkling laugh, "and received two—one a huge, impressive looking fellow who actually frightened Clide when he looked at him."

Skip grinned happily.

"So—that is my story," Lela said, "Clide's people, my people, saw that Clide was not powerful at all. They saw me change before their very eyes and they saw my *Gods* walk from the fire-pit without being harmed. In this manner we have gained back a hundred thousand people without slaughter and bloodshed."

MEN arose, and watching her with worshipping eyes, left the room. The bright colors faded and died. The room was deserted save for the three of them.

Lela arose, and they followed her example.

She smiled at Skipper Nealson.

"Your ship is intact," she said. "It is well guarded. You deserve a reward, and the ship will be loaded with riches. You are free."

Skip looked foolish.

"Thanks."

Lela was suddenly solemn.

"It is I who owe you both thanks," she said. "Remember but one thing. You entered Thon through the vortex of the flat-circle. You entered it only because I wished it and made the proper arrangements. No Outsider will ever enter it again. Go—and be happy with the fortune I give you. Don't come back seeking more."

"Wait a minute," Skip begged. "You're getting way ahead of me. In the first place, I don't want anything for what I've done. I just stood around and looked pretty. If it hadn't been for Herb, I'd have got myself killed

a half dozen times. Me, I like you, and if you got a job for me, I'd like to stay on. Thon."

Lela's face lighted in surprise.

"You—don't wish to return to the Outside?"

Skip shook his head.

"Nope," he said. "I guess Herb will be staying here, and I'm kinda a pal of his and yours. Besides, this may not be the end of trouble. I could come in pretty handy."

Lela turned slowly toward Coates. Her face had gone white. Her eyes stared into his. Her voice was breathless.

"You do not plan to leave? You will stay here—with me?"

Coates took one step toward her and hesitated. His throat was dry.

"I want to stay—more than I've ever wanted anything," he said.

She seemed for the first time genuinely amazed.

"I—truly thought that you were a God," she said at last. "You came here not because you wished to help me—because you—cared for me?"

He nodded.

"I've been a fool," she was in his arms, clinging to him. "I didn't think that my trap would work. I thought that you were real Gods from the Outside. What shall I say?"

"Don't say anything," Coates urged.

He felt like a completely self-reliant man for the first time in his life. He took her in his arms and kissed her. When he let her go, he stood there watching her tremble, her cheeks very red. To tell the truth, he thought, I'm trembling a little inside myself. He glanced over her shoulder at Skip.

Skip was grinning at him.

"Guess you've found your Princess at last, Herb," Skip said.

Coates smiled down at the girl.

"She was with me all the time," he

said gently. "There were times when I just couldn't see her."

He wished that Jeannie Adams could see him now. Herbert Coates, the shipping clerk at Planetary Research, standing in a strange castle on another planet.—A beautiful Princess nestled against his shoulder.

He still didn't quite understand Lela with her strange magic of colors and thought waves.

Yet it wasn't so puzzling. It would take even longer for *her* to understand the strange things that took place on earth.

He wondered, for example, if she would understand how a man like himself could be frightened to live with other people. Be frightened to speak even to a girl like Jeannie Adams for ten long miserable years. If she could grasp what it meant to him to be jerked suddenly out of that humdrum life and shot across several million miles of space to become a God on the planet of Thon.

IT WAS in the quiet of his own room—the magnificent room that had been prepared for him, that Herbert Coates finally felt the full satisfaction of what he had done.

It was during those last few moments of drowsy contemplation, before he felt himself engulfed in the immense softness of the royal bed, that the full meaning of his new life swept over him.

Quite overcome by it, he sat on the edge of the bed and dreamed of the day soon to come when he would marry Lela and become King of Thon.

Herbert Coates smiled the soft smile of the completely contented man.

"Well," he said, remembering the little apartment where he had first smelled the violet perfume, "*guess I'll turn in.*"

Those last words left nothing to be desired. He lay for a long time on his back, and the perfume of Lela, Princess of Thon, wafted into his room and promised wonderful things.

THE END

MONSTERS BY MUTATION



By CHARLES REOUR



NOT so many years back, people interested in the progress of biological science, as well as scientists themselves, were following with great interest in both popular and technical journals, the work being done on that innocuous pest, the fruit fly. It is doubtful if the background and genealogy of any creature, including man, was ever studied with such intensity.

Generation after generation of fly was bred in the laboratory, carefully classified, studied and then killed. Certain groups of fruit flies are able to trace back their ancestry with more accuracy than an English nobleman.

Among the prime reasons for all this careful study of fruit flies was, of course, the study of artificially induced mutation!

Not much is known about mutation, but more is being learned every day. When living things are exposed to certain effects, their genes and chromosomes are so affected, that they pass on to their children, with a certain degree of predictability, the results of these effects. There are

two agencies generally used to induce these effects in living things. Both have been used on fruit flies. Cosmic radiation and x-rays are the devices. Fruit flies are exposed to these radiations, and the changes in succeeding generations of the flies are carefully studied.

The first agency, cosmic radiation, is impossible to control and so the use of x-radiation from a conventional x-ray tube is the most important mutation-inducing element. In fact x-radiation is in a way a lesser form of cosmic radiation. In any event, fruit flies have been subjected to this agency, and it was discerned that monstrous effects were produced. Flies with two heads, flies with no wings, flies with oddly-shaped legs, flies of an almost alien form—all these were the children of the flies exposed to x-radiation.

Human beings of course are frequently x-rayed, apparently never with such intensity as to cause them to produce mutations. Yet it is not uncommon to have people over-exposed to x-rays become sterile. It seems that any dose of x-rays

strong enough⁴ to affect human beings, does so by making them sterile, rather than causing them to produce monsters. But this may be changed.

It seems that in very recent years, a huge laboratory for the study of mutations induced by radiation has been set up. This laboratory, has some of the biggest radiation-producing machines ever built for operation on human beings. The laboratory is called the Earth! And the subjects are all of us. And the radiation-producing machines are atomic bombs! Fortunately these machines are at the present time in the hands of relatively benevolent doctors, but the danger that they will fall into the hands of some with not such good intentions is certain.

We have followed the reports on the human "fruit-flies" at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where the subjects were dosed with tremendous bursts of x-radiation, but almost nothing has been said about the mutation effect. We have been shown pictures of the dreadful burns caused by the bombs, and we know of the physical damage caused. We have even been assured by the military authorities that no monsters have been produced by birth by the peoples of these bombed cities. In fact, the army has gone out of its way to make this clear.

There is one little catch however, even if we may believe that no monsters have appeared—mutations do not necessarily appear in the im-

mediate, succeeding generation of the fruit-fly or the people producing that generation. It may take time. Perhaps many generations are required before the effects show up. But eventually they do.

Numbers of doctors who have visited the bombed areas have almost ignored the immediate burns and radioactive damages done. They have thought primarily of the mutation effects. From their laboratory experience they know how horrible the results of radiation may be. As a consequence, special committees have been selected, consisting of radiation physicists, genetics doctors, and other experts in allied fields, whose sole function is to keep a close watch on the *children* and their *children's children* of the people of the two bombed Japanese cities, in order to detect the first *sports* or mutations, when and if they appear.

With the world apparently moving slowly but inexorably toward another war, the thought of what the atomic bomb will do in terms of damage to physical structures is a lot less impressive than what it will do later simply by implication. The "sins of the fathers" will indeed be visited upon the children.

We know, then, that an atomic bomb is in essence an x-ray machine of tremendous power and intensity—humans, watch out! It is a lot later than you think. And once begun—never ended!

* * *

SPICES OF LIFE



By FRANCES YERXA



THE people of the middle ages used spices as disinfectants, because they thought that disease was accompanied by terrible odors and they believed that by doing away with the bad smell they could overcome the malady. So they sprinkled their streets with nutmeg, tumeric and saffron, and before going out to mingle with the crowds those who could afford it carried spice-balls to guard against infections.

In China there was a law that made a courtier slip a clove into his mouth before presenting himself to his sovereign. Now we use clove gum.

Many laws have been made in regard to spicy perfumes. A Babylonian law required everyone to anoint themselves with perfume. Also the Egyptians were required to baste themselves with perfume at least once a week. It has always been understood that perfume used correctly could help to bring a man around, but years ago there was a disillusioned husband in the British Parliament who became so irate over the feminine use of perfume that he called it witchcraft. Many of the other members jumped on his band-wagon, and in 1774, Parliament passed a law that "All women of whatever age, rank, or degree, maids or widows, that shall from and after this act impose upon and betray into matrimony any of

His Majesty's subjects by the use of scents, paints, cosmetics, artificial teeth, false hair, Spanish wool, iron stays and hoops, high-heeled shoes or bolstered hips, shall incur the penalty of the law now in force against witchcraft and misdemeanors, and that the marriage shall stand null and void."

The desire for spices caused wars to be fought, sealanes opened and world maps to be changed. For many centuries the Arabians guarded the origin of the spices. Deliveries were made overland and the cargo was shifted many times from one caravan to another so the drivers would not know the origin of their cargo. The Arabians even made up stories of the terrifying monsters that lived in the land of spices.

Most of the old countries tried to get control of the spice industry. The Dutch really meant to make something of it. For instance, if they found one of their help carrying a sample of cinnamon to a competitor, they fired him simply by chopping off his head. The Dutch sometimes burned their spice trees just to keep the price up. Once they thought they had burned all the nutmeg trees, but some of the island's pigeons who hadn't been taught about monopolies, carried the seed into surrounding countries, which left the Dutch without a corner on the spice market.

THE WARDER and THE WAMPUM

by GEOFF St. REYNARD



J. J. Bullmaster's cigar popped out of his mouth as the ghostly figure of an Indian Chief floated close by



J. J. Bullmaster would take money from anyone—even a dead Indian — but is wampum money?

ON A great fat rock at the very edge of the canyon's rim a great fat man sat in the sunshine, thinking extremely wicked thoughts.

It was the canyon of the Little Colorado River, at one of its most effective bends; just, in fact, where it makes its last sharp turn and decides to go pushing eagerly forward till it meets first the Big Colorado and then the Grand Canyon. At this curve it is at its most attractive. Huge twisted walls, made of layer on layer of multi-coloured rock, tower three hundred feet and more above the sinuous bright snake that is the Little Colorado; all

the flat surfaces, and those which are almost flat, and even those which are pretty much perpendicular, sport their clumps of gramma grass, their weird ocotillo cactus which looks like a green explosion, or their stunted, maimed little greasewood trees. In summer when the sun heats the rock to sullen fire it is a painter's dream. Some men there are who prefer this spot rather than the unbelievable immensity that is the Grand Canyon, because it is more nearly lifesize and can almost be understood.

The fat man sitting on the uttermost lip of this wonderful hole in the earth was brooding on murder. Not the clean swift death of the bullet, nor the loving steel kiss of the fine long dagger; but the filthy slaying of the soul, which leaves the embittered husk of the man to stagger through murky years of hell till he hangs himself at last with a rope, and goes on to the Hell that is capitalized, but cannot be much worse. . . .

The grossly fat man who was planning murder removed his black hat, which was of the type called bowler in England, and mopped his low sweaty brow with a flaming orange handkerchief, which was of the sort called expensive even in Saville Row or in Bond Street. He had a face like a rather middle-class pig, with very small squinting colourless eyes and a nose that only a mother porker could have thought lovable. His hands were like clusters of little balloons. He wore brightly polished yellow shoes. In short, he added practically nothing to the beauty of the canyon of the Little Colorado.

J. J. Bullmaster was not a man to be impressed by scenic grandeur. If he sat on the edge of the canyon, it was to be alone, the better to plot his dirty deals. If he stared absorbedly at the

vast rocky walls, it was to imagine little pictures of devilry in the back of his grubby mind. Encased as he was in roll upon roll of blubber, it would have taken him minutes to realize it if he had been sitting upon a clump of prickly pear (which he unfortunately was not); and it would not have dawned on him for more minutes that there was anything out of the ordinary going on, had there been forming in front of him in the supernally clear atmosphere the ghost of a human outline (which there was).

FAR away from the fat man, in roaring New York town, lived a nice young fellow named Smith, who had a girl friend, a medium-sized bank balance, and some quite commonplace daydreams of a home and a couple of kids. And this fat Bullmaster on the canyon's lip, this overfed underbrained hog, this slimy fish-belly-white thing, was chucklingly plotting in the dank recesses of his ugly skull just how, by the ingenious sending of a letter, the dropping of three hints in the right places, and the sly manipulation of two pieces of relatively harmless information, he would within a fortnight deprive the young man of his sweetheart (who meant rather more than the hope of heaven to the poor devil), of his really insignificant bankroll, and of every innocent daydream . . . and when it was all accomplished, the great fat swine would be a few dollars wealthier, and would be able to mull over and cherish the thoughts of how he had ruined one more gentleman—only because, when it came right down to it, the young man named Smith was good and normal, and the fat man was bad clear through.

"How," said a voice out of nowhere, and, after a suitable lapse of time for cerebration, Bullmaster gave a slight

jump and turned about. There was no one there.

He shrugged, a titanic operation, and turned himself around once more. "How," said the voice again, and then Bullmaster noticed, in this amazingly transparent desert air, the misty outlines of a human figure. If there was a single redeeming virtue which he possessed, it was absolute freedom from fear of the supernatural. Perhaps it was because he had just enough brain to believe in what he could understand, and that was all. Anyway, he was not frightened in the least, or even very much interested.

"How," remarked the Outline a third time, with some peevishness.

"How yourself," said the fat man ponderously.

Two large and luminous eyes popped into being within the shadowy lines of the head, and regarded Bullmaster with marked interest.

"You not afraid?" asked the voice curiously.

"No," said the fat man, removing his black bowler hat again and obliterating the great drops of sweat along his furrowed forehead. "No, I'm not afraid."

"You not scared spitless?" pursued the phantom, with evident surprise.

"No."

"Holy smoke signals," said the voice incredulously, and a little more detail fizzed into solid actuality, so that he could see that the airy being was an Indian.

"How do you do that?" asked Bullmaster.

"How do-um what?"

"That now-you-see-it-now-you-don't business."

"Nothin' to it," said the voice with modest pride. "Just mess-um around with ectoplasm. Papoose could do-um."

"Well, well," said the fat man, shut-

ting his narrow eyes behind their bulging ramparts of flesh and pursing up his button mouth. "Well, well, well. Learn something every day."

WHEN he opened his eyes J. J. Bullmaster saw that the outline had become a fairly solid chunk of humanity, which wore a breech cloth and sported a half-dozen bedraggled eagle feathers in its glossy black topknot. There were still bits of rock visible through its great red chest, and here and there in the head of the ectoplasm hadn't come right and the sky peeped through, but on the whole it was a fair imitation of a live Indian. Especially the tomahawk in its leather thong looked wickedly real. The apparition was standing on space some four feet out from the canyon's rim.

"Lookum here," went on the ghostly red man, squinting at the human being on the rock, "lookum here, great white brother, how the hell come you no scared to blazes?"

"Why should I be?" queried the fat man.

"Ugh! For couple hundred years Lo been doin' this materialization stunt," said the Indian, a mournful note creeping into his voice. "And every time paleface see Lo he light out like turpentine cat for parts unknown, lettin' out war-cries fit to scare-um panther to death."

"Lo?"

"Lo," repeated the phantom, tapping itself on the chest with such incautious vigour that its hand sank into its chest to a depth of four or five inches. "Lo, the poor, Injun."

J. J. Bullmaster closed his eyes wearily. "If I've heard that weak gag once," he moaned, "I've heard it a hundred million times."

The shade threw back its head and laughed inanely, and the thought came

to the fat man that it was a pretty hare-brained spook, after all.

"Yak, yak, yak," sighed the Indian, wiping his luminous eyes with the back of his hand. "Noble red man gettum great kick out of simple jest." He sat down on nothing and crossed his bare legs comfortably. "Hark, paleface," he said, "this lookum like darn good chance to get to happy hunting grounds at last. How you like to make-um plenty wampum?"

"Like-um fine," grunted Bullmaster indifferently, but his pale eyes lit up as if they had been turned on at the switch.

"Me unfoldum yarn, then. But first, you happen to have pipe of peace on you, chum?" he asked wistfully.

"I only smoke cigars," said the porcine one. "Pipes are for fools and weaklings."

"Drop-um dead," growled the spirit disconsolately, directing a bitter stare at his vis-à-vis. He turned and spat into the gorge, and the fat man, leaning out automatically to watch the curving fall of the spittle, was somewhat startled to see it hit a rock and sizzle into nothingness with a small puff of flame.

"Listen well, oh paleface brother," proceeded the ghost, fixing him with a piercing gaze. "And don't interruptum or you get fat head bashed in.

"By the shores of Colorado, in the Arizona wastelands,

'Neath the shining sun's fierce beamings, 'neath the moon and pale stars' gleamings,

In the tents of Sparkling Water lived a splendid Indian warrior.

Yes, a noble Indian warrior lived within the rounded hogans;

Lived and loved and smoked the peacepipe; lived and fought and drank firewater—"

"Oh, shut up," said the fat Bullmaster wearily.

"Okay, dropum epic blank verse form," agreed the shade with a certain amount of relief. "Hard as dickens to

make up on spur of minute anyway."

"WHAT was all that happy hunting grounds and, ah, wampum?" asked Bullmaster with a show of indifference, while his fat brains churned and seethed like a horrible çauldron full of witch's brew. Wampum = money, money = power; power to control and to blight the lives of innocent, decent, ordinary people, for being decent and innocent meant being obnoxious to the gross and loathly Bullmaster.

"When Drinking Water was um little papoose—"

"Who?"

"Me Drinking Water," explained the phantom. "Son of Chief Sparkling Water, grandson of Big Chief Faucet Water, descendant of High Chief Running Water In Every Room. Yak, yak, yak," he chortled, "noble red man go great on um wireless, eh?"

"The story," growled the plump one angrily. "The story, Super Chief."

"Great white brother has sense of humour like two left feet," muttered the red spirit to himself. "Well, *know then, paleface*, as poet says: Drinking Water was heap worthless Injun—drinkum fire H₂O, get stinkum drunk and stay out all night, smoke-um in bed and often burn down teepee, make-um wolf whistle at glamorous squaws, bettum all wampum on bangtails, stand around all day on corner of reservation making low jokes with um no-good cronies; to put-um in nutshell, Drinking Water one hell of a rip. Well, one day father Sparkling Water—who think Drinking Water should be good and pure—cloutum son on bean with tomahawk in fit of pique, and as Drinking Water (me) lay gasping out last breath on bloody sod father put-um curse upon um."

"Fascinating," drawled Bullmaster.

"And the wampum?"

"Comin', comin'. Don't gettum overheated under big fat collar.

"Tribe of Chief Sparkling Water heap rich. Ancestral wampum stacked high as Sun God, or darn near, anyway. When noble white brother, the crum bum, start infiltrating into Injun territory, tribe take-um wampum and hide in safe place."

Bullmaster breathed an almost inaudible sigh of anticipation. Gold—perhaps antique Spanish doubloons, perhaps even bars, but gold . . .

"So when Sparkling Water part Drinking Water's hair with um axe, he put-um curse on poor son that his spirit must guard great treasure of fantastic amount of wampum till (a) Last Trum-pet or (b)—"

"Or (b)?" hissed Bullmaster.

"(b) Till findum man more worthy than no-good bum like present speaker to own wampum. Then Drinking Water can hand over treasure trove to worthy gink, washum hands of curse, and enter into happy hunting grounds, there to chivvy shades of buffalo and antelope till um last syllable of um recorded time," finished the spirit of the Indian, spreading his hands and rolling his luminous eyes back till he looked like a hammy parody of Al Jolson.

"So?" said the portly white man, hoping against hope.

"So Drinking Water been guardin' treasure ever since, like um private at Fort Knox, night and day, always living in Limbum and dreaming of happy h. g."

"Living where?"

"All-knowing white brother clean-um out wax from big fat ears," said the Indian petulantly. "Limbum."

"Limbo?"

"What the heck white confrere think red man say?"

"Oh."

"And at last Great Spirit, though slow as all get-out, sendum *you*—" Bullmaster now had the greatest difficulty in preventing an oily smile from spreading all over his fat face—"to relieve poor Lo (pardon, poor Drinking Water) of onerous task of guarding all darned wampum.

"By the roaring Colorado, to the humble Drinking Water,

Came the noble portly white man, to take off the red man's burden."

"We can dispense with the Hiawatha stuff," said Bullmaster, shortly.

THE shade grunted. "Killjoy was here," it grumbled.

"Where is this wampum I'm to relieve you of?"

"Not far," said the spirit, rising and stretching. The fat man's new acquaintance had a tendency to come apart at the seams, and the sight of six or eight strata of blue-green rock showing between Drinking Water's head and his shoulders gave even such an imperious creature as Bullmaster quite a turn.

"Not far at all," repeated the ghost, absently scratching the sole of his left foot with the edge of his tomahawk. "About two hundred feet, as um buzzard flies."

"Which direction?"

"Straight down." The Indian chor-tled. "Um dead buzzard, forgot to mention."

"Buried? *Two hundred feet down?*" gasped Bullmaster, a thousand grasping dreams fading out of his ken like wreaths of smoke.

"No, not buried; in um cave, white comrade, you stupid lout," said the Indian in friendly bantering tones. "Lean over and lookum down."

The fat man steadied himself with a podgy hand and leaned over the rim. Far, far beneath, the Little Colorado ran shimmering in the afternoon sun,

all alone and somehow sinister.

"See-um cactus with white center?"

Bullmaster saw a sprawling cactus plant, low on a shelf of rock, like a hideous parasite clinging to the wall. In its center was a round white blob.

"Uh-huh," he grunted, short of breath with the bending.

"That um Injun skull. Markum cave mouth."

It looked as though he could lean over a little further and touch it. It was impossible to believe that two hundred feet of unscalable rock separated it from him. He cursed aloud in anguish of spirit. "But we can't get down there!"

"Surest thing you know-um," said the ghost offhandedly. "Old Injun trail."

"Where?"

"Waugh! Not so fast big fat. Injun spill pinto beans this far because of heap much confidence in newfound greasy-lookin friend; must now know whether aforementioned friend is worthy successor of Drinking Water, with sole proprietorship of biggest darn wampum pile in all Arizona."

"The catch," thought Bullmaster, apprehensively, and tried to smile in an ingratiating fashion.

"For um example," said the Indian, picking off the points on its fingers, "what would paleface do with more wampum than he can count? Would maybe found Sunday School? Would perhaps endow-um research organum-zation? Would do good like crazy?"

"Heavens, yes," assented Bullmaster piously.

"Would in um pig's eye," said the shade with a smirking sneer.

"Listen," cried the fat man desperately. "I'll do anything for you if you show me the way down there. I'll give you anything. Anything at all."

"Drinking Water needum worldly

goods like needum hole in head," said the Indian. "Come, tellum truth, fat brother; what would wampum mean to noble white man?"

"Okay," said Bullmaster, putting his cards on the table with a vindictive bang. "It'd mean I could live like a blasted emperor, and get back at about a million people I don't care much for."

"Right-heap-ho," said the spirit surprisingly. "Paleface (you should pardon um expression) come clean. Show umself worthy of Drinking Water's trust. Prove umself just as big a louse as old Drinking Water ever was. Trail startum over there where defunct lizard reposes."

Bullmaster looked at the corpse of the lizard, which lay at the top of what seemed a sheer drop of thirty feet.

"What!" he roared, incredulous. "I'd break my neck!"

"Injun show confidence in white man," said the shade aggrievedly. "Now turn-um-bout fair play. Have-um little confidence, Chief Rounded Tummy. Have-um little faith and trust."

Something stirred in Bullmaster's memory. The situation seemed familiar, but somehow he could not put his finger on the exact . . . "Lead on, then," he said with a burst of daring. "I'll go anywhere you go."

"Drinking Water beg leave to doubt-um rash statement," said the spook, moving off along the cliff toward the dead lizard with an easy drifting motion. "However, this way, oh white saviour of poor Injun spirit, and watch-um where you step; puttum foot only where red man indicate, or white brother go bouncin' down like um fat rubber ball to happy hunting grounds," it added, chuckling at the thought like a small boy with a ten-cent candy bar. "Watchum big plump step, oh moon-puss paleface."

THE first hundred feet of rock went by like a terrible nightmare, seeming to stretch endlessly out into the past and future so that Bullmaster felt he had been climbing, clinging, clutching, and clambering for years, and would go on clambering, clutching, clinging and climbing into eternity. The strata passed him slowly, like so many great coloured worms packed tier on tier out of sight into the blue sky above and the earth's bowels below. Cacti ripped fiendishly at his pudgy soft hands, tore holes in his black suit of too-heavy cloth; the spears of unknown small plants lanced into him in unexpected and acutely painful portions of his huge anatomy. And all the time the sun beat down at him with great tangible thumpings, like an insane drummer frenziedly pounding out a jungle rhythm on the round fat drum that was his quivering body. To say he was bathed in sweat would be like stating that the Mississippi is a fair-sized trickle of water. He was like a ball of fat in a roaring furnace. He could almost hear the poundage dropping away.

As he followed the old Indian trail under the guidance of the jesting spirit, that ghostly presence hovered a few feet out from the precipice wall and slowly sank as he descended. Time after time, as the ethereal being cracked a puny joke or made a feeble pun, Bullmaster thought of giving up and going back. And then the thought of the incredible riches that awaited him—the wealth of an entire tribe, available now to make him absolute monarch over the destinies of little men like young Smith back in New York—drove him down again, down where the handholds were invisible and the ledges his feet clung to were all but nonexistent. His vast and quavering stomach made swathes of destruction in the sparse un-

dergrowth, while the dropping perspiration added materially to the Little Colorado.

"Keepum balance," warned the spirit. "Here is where trail become plenty steep."

Bullmaster groaned as groans a lost soul.

Eighty feet more somehow went by, eighty feet of incredibly dizzy descent, and suddenly, like the oasis springing up before the Arab who has just been thinking that he would give his camel for a glass of water, the skull in the cactus popped up beneath his feet. It was then a matter of a few dragging moments, and he stood on solid rock again and let his tongue hang out till it touched his fourth chin.

"The cave," he panted, as soon as he could speak.

"Lookum behind you, white brother," said the Indian. "Lookum to big fat rear."

Bullmaster whirled and saw, gaping like a vast ink blot on the rock, a hole. He started forward with a joyous roar. The ghost whipped around in front of him with an upraised hand.

"Take-um gander before leaping," it suggested. He went cautiously around it and peered into the ink blot. It went, not straight in, but straight *down*. He drew back with a hissing intake of breath.

"More of your blasted climbing?" he bawled angrily.

"Nope," said the wraith nonchalantly. "Just jumpum down."

"Jump?"

"Keerect. Jumpum."

"But I'd be dashed to pieces!"

"Dammit, man," said the spirit petulantly, "have-um little bit of confidence in noble red man."

"Confidence?" said Bullmaster, the word once more stirring some memory in his twisted brain, a memory that was

just out of reach beneath the surface of the conscious.

"Go ahead, jumpum," urged the spook. "Trust in red brother to guide fall okay."

BULLMASTER thought of the enormous riches waiting below, shut his eyes, held his breath, commended his well-being to whatever guardian devils he might have, and jumped into space. The wind whistled, the earth rushed up to greet him, and with a frightful gut-jolting *wham* he lit on his stomach on a pile of some semi-yielding slithering substance.

Drinking Water drifted down to him where he lay, the wind knocked completely out of him, full forty feet below the opening of the cave. In the pitchy darkness of this pit the Indian emitted a queer iridescent glow, like an unhealthy glowworm in a cellar.

"Confidence not misplaced," said the spirit benignly. "See, even now you rest on topmost peak of wampum pile."

Bullmaster stared about him, but the ghostly glow was not enough for his weak small eyes. He clawed through his pockets until he grasped a handful of the kitchen matches which he always carried in case of emergencies, such as the possibility of giving some smaller person a really decent hotfoot. He lit one on the sole of his scuffed yellow shoe.

He sat on the topmost pinnacle, indeed; below him the "wampum" spread out to the furthest edges of his little circle or radiance, and beyond there were glitterings and tiny sparklets that promised much, much more. There was more wampum than one brain could ever imagine.

"Plenty wampum, huh?" said the enthusiastic voice of the Indian wraith.

Plenty wampum, indeed. Plenty of wampum.

Wampum . . . billions upon billions upon untold billions of *little black and white shell beads* . . .

BULLMASTER gave a hideous, wordless, inhuman howl blended of rage, cheated hope, and a certain nameless fear that had just raised its ugly head in his blubbery bosom.

"What is wrong with my great pale-face brother?" asked the ghost, its wide luminous eyes shining like those of some titanic cat. "Why you yap like coyote? Has not Drinking Water just made you new guardian of biggest darn wampum pile within borders of great state of Arizona?"

Bullmaster achieved a sort of slobbering oath.

"Wampum!" he cried. "I thought it was money."

"Injun money. What matter, you look down on humble red man's wealth?" asked the shade sternly. "Too thunderin' bad, because you are now big fat guardian of wampum pile, all-too-worthy successor to Injun rake, and Drinking Water is two minutes overdue to leave Limbum and join great ancestors in happy hunting grounds." A wide grin spread over the dully glowing red face. "Well, heap so long, sucker," said the ghost.

"S-s-sucker?"

"Yes," said the Indian, nodding his head. "Noble white man fall for oldest sucker game in um book. Would think slimy slob such as splendid white obviously is would know all about *confidence trick* . . ."

"Wait a minute!" screeched Bullmaster, cravenly hurling himself on his knees. "For God's sake tell me how I get out of this place before you go!" for the wraith was getting misty at the corners.

"Oh, no trouble for brainy white brother," gurgled the spectre, "because

all gottum do is die. Easy enough to do without food and water."

"Die?"

"Sure. Then can go as far as cliff edge topside, and lie in wait for next sucker. Only take Drinking Water two hundred years to find sucker," he said ingenuously. "O' course, paleface has nastier puss than red man—may take little longer for him to gain confidence of next one. Will findum eagle feathers over yonder to make imitation of Injun guardian slightly less ridiculous. Suggest white brother call umself Poisoned Water, to add note of authenticity."

His legs had all but vanished, and there was a distinct hole in his chest. But the eyes and grin were there.

"And when fat-stuff paleface finds sufficiently no-good replacement to guard wampum treasure-trove, then he also can go on to hunting grounds. Which, in case of fat slimy paleface brother now sitting on wampum, may not be quite so happy."

The spirit drew itself up and raised a hand. It made a brisk rapping motion on the air before it, as though it knocked on the invisible entrance to some unimagined land.

"Open um door, Thunderbird," it said. "Wasted enough time here, already. Drinking Water now released for active duty. Open um door."

The wan luminous figure blurred and vanished, and J. J. Bullmaster, alias Poisoned Water, the Guardian of the Wampum, hysterically began to tear his clothes from his great unwieldy body, to claw insanely at his bone-dry throat, and to scream, and scream, and scream. And in faraway New York a certain nice young man named Smith suddenly straightened up and smiled as a curious inexplicable dread which he had been feeling about his heart for some days abruptly vanished, like an evil frost before the cleansing sun.

A TALL lean man sat on a large fat rock on the lip of the canyon of the Little Colorado and stared at the strata which formed the opposite wall. Immersed as he was in the grandeur of the scene, in was some moments before he noticed an odd thickening in the air before him. Some four feet out from the cliff a figure seemed to be taking shape in the atmosphere. He gawked, his mouth open, terrified yet enthralled.

It seemed to be a man—yes, a large, pulpy, flabby white man, clad simply but effectively in a black bowler hat and scuffed yellow shoes. In the band of the bowler six or seven tattered eagle feathers were thrust, giving the apparition a most bizarre appearance. Solidifying, it sighed and spoke.

"Haven't got used to doing that yet," it said mournfully. "Harder than you'd think. Still, I haven't been dead so many years. Takes time, I guess."

It closed its puffy little eyes wearily, and embarked on what to the petrified listener sounded like a prepared speech.

"How, noble white man! The spirit of great warrior Poisoned Water—" it opened its eyes, "—that's me—" it closed them again, "—comes to you from distant past, bringing proposition. How you like-um become sole owner and proprietor of—"

The portly spook opened its small eyes and observed without great surprise that the tall lean man was haring away over the horizon. With a groan of resignation it spat, and watched the saliva connect with a rock and sizzle out in a spurt of flame.

Slowly allowing its ectoplasm to evaporate, the ghost of Poisoned Water, nee J. J. Bullmaster, disappeared once more from the prying eyes of the mortal world, and drifted unhappily down to its eternal task of guarding the biggest wampum pile in all Arizona.

READER'S PAGE

A DURN GOOD ISSUE

Sirs:

Just a few comments on the September issue of FA, which, by the way, was a durn good one.

1. "The Children's Room" by Ray Jones—now there is a story. Jones is a swell writer—more!

2. "The Mad Scientist" by Bloch. I certainly agree with you, we see too little of Bob these days. I hated to put his story in second place, but the one by Jones was so good!

3. "Come Along With Me" by S. M. Tenneshaw. Okay, and then some! More, please.

4. "Once To Die" by J&D de Courcy, parts of it were a little vague, but still okay.

5. "The Shroud Sewers" by Livingston, odd, but quite good. Title was a little confusing, thought for a while it was something else. . . .

6. "The Secret of Elena's Tomb" by von Cosel. Here, now, is a dilemma. I dunno whether to call it silly or magnificent. I mean about the spirits, poltergeists, in addition to the bring-back-to-life theme. Can't make up my mind on this one.

Cover: That guy Jones can PAINT!

Interior art: Glad to see Finlay again. He's always good. Sharpe also. Ditto Rod Ruth.

Features—interesting. Although I think the reader's page could be made longer. Your fact fillers are good, keep them coming.

All in all, a durn good issue. Keep up the good work in the future.

Don Wilson,
495 N. Third St.,
Banning, Cal.

Well, padnah, (as we might say in Mammoth Western) it was a durn good issue as far as we are concerned too! And don't worry about us keeping up the good work. Watch the coming issues! . . . Ed.

THANKS AND A SUGGESTION

Sirs:

I have been a reader of stf and fantasy for about twenty years, ever since I first saw a copy of AMAZING STORIES way back when. This, however, is my first letter to an editor of such a magazine and the reason is not to comment on a work of fiction, but to give thanks to you for publishing a most amazing account—the true story of Karl Tazler von Cosel's life.

Here indeed is a brilliant mind and a noble character. It is pitiful that his grand efforts only met with frustration through the ignorance of the

outside world. However, I can only feel that he was aided by something beyond science as he seemed involved with unseen forces many times in his career. His is a story not easily forgotten. One to be read and re-read.

Now to get to another matter. I believe the average reader buys stf and fantasy not to be read once, but to file away for further enjoyment at a later date. However, a pulp magazine makes a poor appearance on a library shelf and also becomes tattered with age.

I would like to see a monthly book or magazine on good paper, with several thousand pages of the great stf novels of all time. There are many that are waiting to be reprinted for just such a purpose. I feel sure that all readers of stf would be willing to pay well for such a publication. Also, I would like to see the publishers of stf and fantasy issue a yearbook containing their complete printing for that year.

Incidentally, I find the Shaver stories very fascinating. But again, thanks for "The Secret of Elena's Tomb."

Harry W. Custer,
8224 Superior St.,
Center Line, Mich.

We'll like to say that we think you've got a very good suggestion there, Harry. And we're sure that it could be done except for one small (ha ha!) item—paper. That is the bogey man of the publishing world today. Maybe sometime Ed.

CALLING ALL PH.D.S

Sirs:

There is no denying the entertainment value of the fantasy field, but there is another angle that is being overlooked, particularly by the scientific Ph.D.s you mentioned in your last issue.

I understand that you are in no way making an attempt at allegory or other forms of moralization. But the moral is sprinkled through the pages. While we do not meet with the situations in the story pages, nature is after us all the time—volcanic eruptions, tornadoes, floods, even disease. Civilization is after us all the time—railroad accidents, motor accidents, fires, even home accidents. To say nothing of the spectre of the high cost of living. Including wars.

Which brings out the fact that with so many existent potentialities, it is up to us to enjoy life

when we can. The futility of the modern mad rush which ends in so little personal satisfaction in so many cases, psychotic conditions in others, speaks for our need of a longer range in our views of life.

As for these various forces and possibilities in stf, let some of the Ph.D.s come around with irrefutable information that some of them could not exist. Da Vinci was wacky in his own day—a genius in this. Fulton was the laughing stock of the world with his steamboat—but what of the opinion of these moderns? Need I go on?

And as a last thrust at these soundbought wearing stuffed shirts plastered with degrees, they apparently have their noses so close to their microscopes or textbooks, that they cannot recognize that vision has always come before reality—imagination has always preceded every tangible asset civilization boasts. Dropping reality entirely for a second, do these same scientists ever hobnob with the English professors on the campus? Horrors! And they read, study, and teach such fairy tales as the Odyssey of Homer, Poe's Raven. Indeed, I once had a very much respected professor who was paid for teaching Greek mythology.

Never forget that nobody remembers the stuffed shirt officials who forced Rembrandt into bankruptcy. We will give them credit for being realists in the sense that certain scientists are realists. Rembrandt did have imagination and vision. . . . But why go on? . . .

Keep up the good work in FA.

M. J. Ireland,
Box 26,
Eudora, Kansas.

Very well stated, Mr. Ireland. And what do the rest of you readers think about this—even some of the Ph.D.s.....Ed.

ORCHIDS TO MR. JONES

Sirs:

This is the first letter I have ever written to an editor, although during my thirty years as a stf fan many stories have aroused special appreciation interest in me.

"The Children's Room" in your September issue is the most appealing story I have ever read in any magazine. An author capable of so charmingly written a word deserves higher praise than can be expressed in ordinary words.

Many thanks to Mr. Jones, and to you.

J. McReynolds, Rn.,
1001 S. Westmoreland Ave.,
Los Angeles 6, Cal.

We're sure that Mr. Jones will be as pleased as we are that you liked his story so well.....Ed.

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Richard Alan,
2924 N. 58th St.,
Omaha 4, Neb.

There you are, Richard.....Ed.

INTO OUR CHARMED CIRCLE

Sirs:

In regards to the September issue of FA, words cannot adequately express just how much I enjoyed reading Karl Tanzler von Cosel's true story, "The Secret of Elena's Tomb." It was doubly interesting to me, as I'd read the merest outline of this affair in a national weekly some months ago, and it only served to "tease" me more than anything else. The cover design prompted me to buy the magazine, and I want to say that the cover was really something to look at! I'm going to buy a frame for it, and put it on the wall of my "fantastic hobby" room, where I keep many fantastic things.

Yes, if you were running a voting contest, "The Secret of Elena's Tomb" would win my A number 1 vote—believe me.

As to the other stories, of course I liked them all, especially "Come Along With Me," that super-imaginative tale by S. M. Tenneshaw, and "The Mad Scientist" by Robert Bloch.

All the stories were super as far as I am concerned—even the "man with a halo" (of electricity) stirred my imagination so much that I had nightmares. I'm speaking of course of "Once to Die." (Man bites executioner—that's news!)

I'd like to hear from other women readers of FA. I saw several women's names among your letters from readers. That's what inspired me to write. Am I welcomed into your charmed circle? Thank you. I'll come again sometime.

Mrs. Muriel E. Eddy,
125 Pearl St.,
Providence 7, R. I.

You certainly are welcomed into our charmed circle, Muriel. And one sure way of staying in it is to write often. Fair enough?.....Ed.

A STORY OF GREAT FAITH

Sirs:

May I take this opportunity to thank you for publishing Dr. Karl Tanzler von Cosel's immortal story, "The Secret of Elena's Tomb."

In the thirty-five years that I have been permitted to live on this Earth, I have heard and read many stories of love and faith. I would like to go on record as a firm believer in eternal life and say that "The Secret of Elena's Tomb" should be read by every student of theology, clergyman, and scientist. I am sure that it is the greatest *true* love story ever written.

Let me thank you again for this soul-stirring story. I am sure that the whole world thanks you for giving this wonderful man a chance to

tell the truth. (Even though orthodox believers sneer.) I am very sincerely yours,
Rev. DeWitt W. Jernigan,
Box 3064, Station A,
Savannah, Ga.

And many thanks to you, Reverend.....Ed.

ZERO DOUBLE MINUS

Sirs:

As a general rule I like most of the stories that you publish in your magazines. But I would like to know one thing. What in the world possessed you to publish "The Secret Of Elena's Tomb"? I have read it and several of my friends have read it (and we have been reading your magazine for some years) and we are in complete agreement that on any rating system we would rate it O— (zero double minus). We didn't like it.

I think you should give Richard S. Shaver a bit more attention. I greatly approve of Mr. Shaver's "Red Dwarf," and also, Chester S. Geier's "Forever Is Too Long." I would be quite happy, as one reader, if all your stories were like these.

I'm waiting impatiently for Shaver's new story, "Witch of the Andes."

John P. Garrett,
Box 495,
Clemson, S. C.

Well, John, by this time you've read Dick's new story. How about dropping us a line and letting us know how you liked it? And as to Geier, well, don't worry, there's one writer you'll be seeing plenty of now—and in the future. His "Forever Is Too Long" has been rated as one of the classics of fantasy fiction. And rightly so... Ed.

CONGRATS TO ZIFF-DAVIS

Sirs:

I have just finished reading the September issue of FA and was very much pleased with it. I'll start off, however, saying that I didn't particularly care for von Cosel's story. It seemed to be too much of a love story. It would have been better if most of the mush had been left out.

Tennessee's "Come Along With Me" was very good. Peter and Paul reminded me of a couple of friends. I would like to see more of these two characters, also Lucy....

"The Mad Scientist" was good. I wonder if Robert Bloch wrote that story from experience or from imagination?

"Once to Die" held my interest all through the story. Congrats to the de Courcys for a fine little story.

"The Children's Room" and "The Shroud Sewers" were also very fine stories.

But the one who deserves the real congrats is your company, for publishing a really fine magazine. Keep up the good work.

George Marshall,
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HORRIFIED OR EXALTED

Sirs:

I can't quite determine whether to be horrified or exalted after reading the lead story in your September issue. Von Cosel treated a more than delicate subject with peculiar clarity, depth of perception, and a most remarkable minuteness of detail. "The Secret of Elena's Tomb" is probably the most unusual story ever printed in your magazine, and if it is true, it is important to every human being. Mysteries of the mind and soul have cast deep shadows on humanity ever since man emerged from the primal chaos, and I believe the solving of these all-important puzzles is, and should be, a major matter for the scientists working on them. A fine story, and one to leave man's imagination on fire, believe me.

As is usual lately, all the rest of the stories and features were exceptional, especially "The Children's Room," by Raymond F. Jones. I believe it is his finest work to date. A mutant story so probable that one yearns to count his genes and chromosomes. It too is provocative of much musing during the clear, quiet hours.

I'll rank the other stories equally, for I think the strong and weak points in each were quite evenly distributed.

Paul F. Anderson,
6702 Windsor Ave.,
Berwyn, Ill.

We'd say, Paul, that you feel more exalted than anything else. And doggone it, we kind of have the same feeling! Nothing makes an editor happier than the knowledge that he's giving his readers the kind of stories they want. Of course, you can't always please everybody, but we'd say that along with you, the great majority of fantasy readers are well satisfied.....Ed.

SHAVER AND THE "FANS"

Sirs:

After reading your magazine for many years I feel it my duty to express my opinion on a very controversial subject. I consider myself moderately active in the fan world and I have found a great deal of ill feeling toward Richard Shaver. I wish to point out that as an author, I consider Shaver among the best, but I do resent, as do fan, his trying to put his stories across as fact. You will point out that he has many followers. Well, maybe so, but I wish you would print this letter as an opposite opinion.

Lee D. Quinn,
316 East 21th St.,
New York 67, N. Y.

We're very glad to hear your opinion, Lee. But one thing we'd like to point out about the "fans" you speak of. They number about 200 million total. A mere drop in the bucket considering the real fan world that buys and reads our magazine—and likes Shaver. And the funny thing is, you yourself say you like him—as an author. O.K., that's the main reason we all like him.....Ed.

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One of the most mysterious ghostly appearances in history occurred at Mons, in the first world war. British Tommies saw phantom bowmen who appeared in the sky to rout the Germans, who fled in terror. (See page 176 for details)



THE MONS STAR



Another scan
by
cape1736

